

## MY LITTLE FRIEND



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**Cover graphics: Rambabu Arle.**

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## ABOUT THIS ANTHOLOGY

The stories in this anthology may be considered a cross-section of my literary journey.

They reflect the cultural values I believe in and the cultural diversity have come to appreciate after I moved to America in 1973.

All these stories have been written in Telugu and translated into English or vice versa and published in magazines and websites. (The details are given at the end of each story in the book.).

Two stories, *frostbite* and *the image in her mind* have been written before I moved to the U.S. and published in reputable Telugu magazines. The first story *frostbite* has been published in several magazines. Some of the stories, written after I have moved to the States, are set in India and thus feature Indian landscape, convictions and attitudes prevalent prominently in my native land.

Other stories are set in the States yet carry a few layers of my Indian roots. Thus, generally speaking, I have attempted in these stories to scrutinize all the values--Indian and American--in juxtaposition and find a common thread underlying the prevalent stereotypes and dig deeper for a better understanding of the two cultures.

The title story *My Little Friend* illustrates friendship across the bounds of geography and generational gap. The stories in this anthology attempt to tie in several aspects in both the cultures. I hope readers find these stories significant from that perspective.

From the response I have received on the stories published on my website, [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net), it is apparent that some of these stories are being used in multicultural studies. Some sites have reprinted the stories in full or provided links.

I am grateful to the magazines, and websites who have published these stories and the educationists who have been using these stories in their diversity education. Thanks to Rambabu Arle for the charming cover illustration.

Thank you.

Malathi Nidadavolu

August 26, 2012

[www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net)

<http://www.tethulika.wordpress.com>.

## 1. SIX BLIND MEN and the ELEPHANT

I began my preparation to leave for the United States of America. An ardent patriot and well-wisher told me, "Look, you are an unofficial ambassador of India. Don't forget that you inherit the spirit of Gandhi."

"Which one ?" I asked him timidly.

He cast a nasty look at me and left.

I have a degree in math. I can talk about the Pythagorean theorem. May be a little about Einstein. But about Sankara and Panini ? I rushed to the library and checked out fifty books on every conceivable topic--from Mahatma Gandhi to Indira Gandhi, from Aurobindo to Guru Maharaj ji, from babas to cobras, Hindu religion, Elephanta caves, Meenakshi temple, Brindavan Gardens ...

Then I talked to people who had been to the States and returned to India with valuable possessions and invaluable ideas. They advised me:

"Be yourself. Don't imitate them blindly and bring shame to our country."

"Remember, you've got to be a Roman in Rome."

"Take plenty of cotton sarees. Cotton is very expensive there."

"Don't take any sarees. No one wears sarees in the States."

"Americans are highly individualistic."

"Americans are success-oriented."

"Americans are honest."

"Americans expect you to be on your own."

"Oh! It's heaven. The streets are strewn with dollars."

"The American girls are pretty and friendly. May be, you can get me a date," one of my brother's friends hoped.

One of my nieces secretly told me that I should send her four packets of that revolutionary pantyhose which was advertised in the latest issue of a Bombay fashion magazine.

I was also educated on such details as how to hold a fork, when to say 'thank you,' when to say 'you're welcome,' which car, which toothpaste ...

Finally I arrived in New York with a suitcase that was half empty and a handbag loaded with Andhra pickles. If the customs officials thought I was crazy, they hid it very well.

After a week-long sleep-eat-sleep schedule, I woke up one beautiful morning. I looked out the window.

The first snow of the season!

The first snow of my life!

Glistening white flakes of snow floating in the air, settling gracefully on the tree tops, roofs of houses, cars, bicycles, and people.

I was thrilled!

I pulled my winter clothes out of the closet and put them on. I felt like a polar bear.

But it was the most exciting moment of my life when I stepped out on the street and looked up to feel the snow flakes on my cheeks.

A BIG THUMP!

I slipped and fell.

I got on to my feet, lifted one foot and fell again.

I fell for a third time.

I rose to my feet again, and before taking that small step, which was not in any sense a giant step for mankind, I looked around. I knew I was being watched.

With a gentle smile hovering on his lips, he approached me and extended his hand. I grabbed it quickly and walked over to a safer spot.

As I was about to go on my way, I said to him, "You know I just found out something no one has ever told me before."

"Oh?"

"That one could slip on snow and fall!"

\*\*\*

(Reprinted with permission from Wisconsin Academy Review, June 1982)

## 2. THE BUG

Early morning beams were piercing through the dark night and crawling to umpteen directions faintly.

Feeling still lazy, Vallari opened her eyes, looked around, stretched and got up from the bed. She opened the glass patio door, went into the kitchen, heated water and poured it in to the coffee filter. While the dark, thick coffee was trickling slowly into the bottom dish, she went into the bathroom, held the toothpaste tube in one hand and the brush in the other.

It was in that moment, she saw the bug. It came from nowhere, flew across her face and sat on the mirror in front of her. Cute Vallari thought only for a moment though. She stared at the bug for a second and looked around for something to drive it away. She grabbed the towel and tried to impel the bug to leave the room.

The bug was in no mood to leave the room. Possibly the day dawned for it also in that moment; it was as vibrant as Vallari after her first cup of strong coffee. The bug started hopping around nimbly from mirror to the wall, to the shower curtain, and back to the mirror, like an amateur dancer just turned pro. Apparently, it was a performance of *its* lifetime!

*What's its problem? Is it trying to provoke me? Um, maybe even laughing at me ... in its own way of course, ha, ha in its own language?* Vallari thought. It was not funny though. That's not the thing she would look forward to first thing in the morning. She hadn't had her first coffee yet. No, this certainly was not amusing to her. "Okay, you do your acrobats as long as you please and leave," she told the bug and started brushing her teeth vigorously.

Generally speaking, the houses in America are not built in the innermost corners of some godforsaken woods, not the kind of woods wherein even the *crows and ants cannot infiltrate* as the saying goes, yet the houses *are built airtight*, hopefully I might add. I say this because some of them are built with such flimsy materials that a bike can run into the wall and go through easily. At the same time, they are also airtight; forget the fresh air from the green pastures, not even the air from the pine trees in the yard can enter the houses.

It was amusing to Vallari. Anyway, because the houses are built airtight, Vallari got into the habit of opening the patio door and the bedroom windows in the morning as soon she woke up. She would leave them open hoping some fresh air would flow in and close them before she left for work.

Living room had a glass door and a wire mesh. Several of her friends suggested that she should have a wire mesh door installed in her bedroom as well; the mesh would keep the bugs, flies, mosquitoes and other such mean creatures out while bringing fresh cool breeze in, they said. She did not relish the thought. "It's okay. They're also living, breathing creatures like any of us, aren't they? Let them come in like any other relative. They're not going to move in with me forever, aren't they? I don't mind if they use my home as a thoroughfare," she said, smiling playfully. In reality, it never happened; never mosquitoes or other bugs swarmed the place in a big way and annoyed her. It is only now, and only this one bug; probably it's gotten lost!

She kept brooding over as she glared at it. Wondered if it had a name? What could it be? It has wings like a butterfly but surely has no other signs to indicate that it is a butterfly. It is dark like a fly but then again a bit too large to be a fly. She heard of big flies but this one is *really big*!

The bug came into the room as soon as she turned the light on in the bathroom and settled on the mirror. Maybe it is attracted to light! Um, Vallari pondered over all the things she had forgotten after she had left India; she was sad, felt like she was losing her memory! She couldn't even remember that she was a Telugu woman until and unless someone invited her for Dasara or Deepavali festivities.

She turned her eyes toward the bug again. It was hovering around, staying close to the light. It might go away if the light was turned off, she thought. She turned off the light, waited silently for a couple of minutes as if praying for peace on earth and turned the light on again. It was gone! *What a relief!* She sighed.

She washed up quickly and went into the kitchen, poured herself a fresh hot cup of coffee and sat down in front of the computer. She was ready for the latest news and chat via the MS window.

She turned on the computer and Lo and behold! The bug was sitting on the wall, as if born to annoy Vallari. She was annoyed of course. "What a ...!" she cursed the bug; then came to her senses. "Why am I wasting my precious time for this squalid creature," she chided herself and opened the mail.

The bug must have considered her behavior disrespectful; it flew away. She watched its departure. She was happy and sad at the same time: Happy that it was gone and sad that she might have hurt its feelings!

Entertaining several conflicting emotions thus, she spent an hour on the PC and went into the living room to watch TV. She settled down on the couch, looked up and found the bug on the wire mesh! She was stunned for a second, stared at the bug for a few more seconds and decided to let go of it.

She sat down with her second cup of coffee; her eyes were hovering around. She was amused too in a strange way. She was looking for the bug without thinking. The popular proverb came to her mind, *like the lady who worries for the devil, for want of relatives!* Then something else occurred to her—maybe it wanted to go out but could not get through the mesh.

Vallari opened the mesh door slightly to make way for the bug to escape.

The bug either did not understand Vallari's well-meaning intentions or had no intention of leaving the room, or, thought the time was not right yet ... anyway, it did not leave the premises.

Now, Vallari had another thought. It was also possible that the bug's tiny legs got stuck in the wire mesh thereby rendering it incapable of flying. With great hesitation, she brought her index finger close to the bug, barely touching one of its wings.

The bug moved to the left, just about one tenth of one millimeter and made itself comfortable.

Vallari took a deep breath. She was sorry for the bug; she assumed that the poor bug had gotten lost and tried to help. The bug however did not appreciate her concern, or so it seemed. It was in no mood to go out despite Vallari's efforts to help. That was beyond her comprehension—why this bug would not want to go into the world outside? The whole world was wide open for it to enjoy with the readily available bright light provided by the sun naturally. Why be stuck within



these four walls? What kind of pleasure it was getting or seeking from this artificial light in this airtight room? Vallari could not comprehend the bug's mode of thinking. If the bug had come into the room only for the light, did it not stand to logic that the light outside was thousand times brighter? Hum! We entertain such thoughts about people but come to think of it, probably it is the same with bugs too! All living creatures yield to the temptation by the tiny bit of light that flashes through a small hole, and enter the hole, hoping to harvest the pleasures from the light in abundance.

“Hello! You, empty-head! Here is the path to the outside world; there you will have unconditional, unlimited freedom; go, just go and revel in it. Why do you want to get entangled in the maze of this tiny bit of light,” she said addressing the bug, as she set out to complete her routine.

It was 4:00 in the afternoon by the time Vallari was done with her work in town and returned home. She walked to the windows to close the glass panels before turning the AC on. Involuntarily, her eyes searched for the bug; no, it was not there. With great relief, she turned the AC on and slumped in the couch with a cup of green tea. Involuntarily, her eyes turned toward the patio door again. Ha, the bug was there! Not on the door but on the carpet below, flat on its back. Vallari's heart twitched. She got up apprehensively, approached the bug and looked at it narrowing her eyes. No doubt, its life had come to an end. She wondered—is this a suicide or accident? Homicide or involuntary manslaughter or rather bugslaughter? Vallari picked it up without further ado and threw it out the door.

She could not stop thinking about it though. Apparently the bug's role had ended in this world of illusion. After teasing her, annoying her, and pushing her to the edge for nearly four hours, the bug left. Vallari could not decide whether she should thank the bug or tender her apologies to it.

The following day, Vallari woke and was about to open the patio door. She remembered yesterday's sideshow and stopped. Then opened the door a little and peeked. No sight of bugs.

She sat down in front of the computer with her usual cup of coffee. As she was about to move the mouse, a bug perched on the back of her hand like a pet parrot. She chuckled; poor thing, this bug did not know the fate encountered by another bug the day before. This bug, once again was stuck amidst these four walls, and would never be able to leave this room. Up until now, Vallari thought only people coveted for places and things. But, after watching the behavior of these bugs, she came to believe that it is the same with all the living organisms in this god's creation when it comes to running after illusions.

Just in that moment, a thousand-watt bulb lit in her head! She decided to get used to the idea; she should learn to live amicably with these bug families, not fight them.

She noticed something else also—the bug visits are limited to a bug a day! And that is strange but livable!

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(The Telugu original, *velugu* was published on <http://tethulika.wordpress.com>, 10 July 2010.)

### 3. TWO GLASS BUBBLES

We are living in a glass bubble  
Constantly looking for germs  
Washing hands  
Using lotion  
Brushing teeth  
Wearing socks and shoes  
Still worrying about the athlete's foot  
Washing fruits and vegetables  
With special anti-bacterial waters  
And following up with pills.

\*\*\*

A woman with similar habits felt a sudden urge to see the world  
And so she crossed the ocean and arrived in a small town.  
She was walking as in a dream.  
One day the lady walking down the street  
In her pink dress  
Saw a little child playing in the dust.  
The child picked up the fruit  
And lightly blew away the dust  
and took a large bite.  
"She didn't wash it"  
"She didn't even wipe off the dust with a rag  
or on her frock"  
The little child  
stood there staring at her  
And biting into the fruit.  
The pink lady says  
almost instinctively  
"Come"  
And extends her hand

in a friendly gesture  
for the little child to hold.  
The child kicks to her heels, as if responding to a drill sergeant  
And runs toward the pink lady,  
Her hand still moist  
from the fruit she just bit into.  
She wipes her hand on her frock  
It is a sticky still.  
They are not clean  
Not clean at all!  
The pink lady links  
her fingers round the little ones  
And walks the distance  
To the child's room.

\*\*\*

The child proudly displays  
her earthly possessions  
A few clothes, a couple of books,  
a pencil, an eraser won in last night's games  
and a wilted flower.  
"See"  
Yes. That is the flower the pink lady gave her yesterday.  
A prized possession.  
The lady picked it up from the ground under the tree.  
For the little girl it is a prized possession.

\*\*\*

The pink lady returns to her room  
Washes her hands with soap  
Wipes with a lotion cloth  
Rubs several ointments  
Looks at the palms  
She can still feel the little fingers  
Clutched into her own

The wet dirty hands.  
She washes again  
Wipes again  
No.  
The feeling of dirt won't go away.

\*\*\*

At the same time  
at the other end of the street  
The house mother  
Was telling the little girl  
"Wash your hands. Time for supper"  
The girl stares at her hands.  
"What?"  
No answer.  
"Come on, move."  
The girl won't move.  
"What is the matter?"  
You know the rules."  
Still the same stare.  
No sign of moving  
"You need to wash your hands  
before eating. You know that."  
"I don't have to wash"  
she says, looking at her hands  
"They are clean" she mumbles vaguely

\*\*\*

She feels the clutch of the pink lady  
She was so clean  
Her hands were so clean  
And beautiful like the tender shoots of the mango tree  
Pink, delicate and beautiful!  
"I don't have to wash"  
she whispers.

For the housemother, it is puzzling.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes"

"Don't you want to eat?"

No answer.

"Go. Wash your hands"

"I don't have to"

"What" The house mother is confused.

The girl repeats as if in a dream

"I don't have to."

"Well, you know you can't eat  
unless you wash your hands"

No response.

No amount of persuasion will help.

The little girl will not wash her hands.

She does not want the feeling to go away.

The house mother complains to the head mother.

"May be she is not hungry,

"May be she is not feeling well,

"Let it be. We will see tomorrow"

They decide to leave the little girl alone.

The little girl goes to bed clutching her hands tight  
and nudging them under the pillow.

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At the other end of the street  
the pink lady goes to bed applying the lotion  
one more time and thinking about  
the little girl, the fruit, the flower  
and the tight clutch touching the innermost chord!

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Author's Note:

Inspired by the children's smiles at Chetana, Guntur, India. Dr. N. Mangadevi, the founder-director has recently been awarded the Child Welfare award 2000 for her selfless service to the needy children.

Our cultures determine our customs and habits and we live within their purview like in glass bubbles. We are not only creatures of habit but also of environment.

While I was visiting the children's home I noticed that while we are so absorbed with our habits, there is also a side of human nature that just beats the odds and takes over. At that level the innermost chord vibrates and prevails.

Regardless our likes and dislikes, we cherish our customs and habits but the cordiality always responds at the human level, irrespective of color, creed and/or race.

(Published on Desi Journal.com.)

#### 4. The COLOR OF SKIN

It is Sunday. Neelaveni is bored. *Color of skin*—a play being shown in town, she recalls.

“Let’s go to the play,” she says to her husband, Sundaram.

He looks up. “Play? Um. That’d be nice. But I need to finish this paper and mail it tonight,” he says. Nothing new, thinks Neelaveni.

She decides to go alone. Sundaram offers to drop her off at the theater but she says no, not necessary, just a brisk twenty-minute walk and she enjoys walking. Sundaram promises to pick her up after the show though. He insists. “Wait for me at the door. Don’t walk in the dark. It’s not safe, you know,” he tells her one more time before she left.

Neelaveni nods, assures him that she would wait for him, grabs her purse and leaves.

The lobby is crowded. The tickets are sold out, almost. Neelaveni has lucked out, got the last one. She takes the ticket and moves close to the wall and stands there watching the crowd. She does not want to go into the theater until the curtain time. She notices that somebody is signaling with his eyes towards something. Her eyes turn to that direction. “It” is actually a person—a little girl—standing in a corner and crying.

The little child, probably four-years old, is standing there crying, holding a ticket in one hand and a little doll in the other. Neelaveni looks at her. The girl is wearing a frock with big flower prints and worn out shoes, possibly bought in a Goodwill store; her dark curly hair is tied with a red ribbon. The hair fanned out like a hibiscus in full bloom.

A compassionate gentle lady is trying her best to calm her down, while keeping a safe distance from her to avoid any physical contact and possible contraction of some horrible disease. The little girl is not calmed down, would not say who she is, probably does not know what to say. She continues to say “I want mommy” in a refrain and in between spasms of sobs.

A few others, also standing at a comfortable distance, keep asking questions, which apparently made no sense to the little one. A middle-aged man casts meaningful looks at Neelaveni. He looks at the girl and Neelaveni, rolling his eyeballs like tennis ball from side to side. It seems he is expressing his disapproval for neglecting the child.

Neelaveni understands. Huh! He thought the little one is hers, because? Because the color of their skin of the two, Neelaveni and the child, is dark.

She is annoyed but only for a second. Then she is sorry for the little child. She goes closer to her. The child jumps and wraps both her arms around Neelaveni’s legs. Neelaveni is speechless. She looks around. Everybody around seems to be enjoying the free show. It took only a second for her to understand why the girl came running to her—for the same reason as the gentleman, who assumed they were related—the color of her skin!

The man winks at her again. His look speaks volumes. “Glad I noticed it and made you realize too. Somebody else would have called the child services, you know!” “You should be careful.” “You should take care of your child.”

Neelaveni does not know much about the system yet has gained some knowledge by watching the Court TV. She can easily imagine the child's fate, had she got caught in it. Neelaveni is in no mood to explain that it is not her fault, and she is not related to her. She knows that those who have enormous faith in the "system" are blind to the realities of it.

The curtain is raised in the theater; it is time to go in. The audience is settled in their seats. Neelaveni is still in the lobby with the little girl. The girl stays put, clinging to her coattails and sucking on her thumb, it is as though she feels safe and has no reason to cry. She is feeling "comfy" like a baby duck under mother duck's wing.

Neelaveni waits for five more minutes, nobody in sight to claim the child. On the stage, the emcee starts with his first joke.

Neelaveni goes into the theater and finds a place from where she can keep an eye on the entrance. She hopes the mother would show up and picks up the child.

The show starts. Characters come on the stage, one after another. Fifteen minutes go by. A woman comes on to the stage. "Mommy," the child shouts. People around are annoyed, "Hush".

Neelaveni apologizes to them and whispers to the child, "Is that your mom?"

The child nods, yeah. Now who the mother is clear, it is the woman on the stage. Neelaveni is relieved. She will hand over the child to her mother after the show and be done with it.

The moment has come at last. The show ends, and the mother comes running to Neelaveni. She apologizes and thanks Neelaveni profusely on and on. Eventually she gets to the explaining part.

The woman, Jennifer, is an aspiring actress. After a long struggle, she got a small part in this play. She has no financial means to hire a babysitter. Therefore, she asked her cousin to keep an eye on the child in return for a free ticket to the show. The cousin, Camilla, agreed to the arrangement but she had another errand to run before coming to the theater, and so suggested she'd meet the mother and the child at the theater. That was the arrangement. For some uncanny reason Camilla did not show up. It was getting late for the actress. Hoping Camilla would show up eventually, she told the child to wait at the gate and went into the green room.

The woman thanks Neelaveni again. Neelaveni listens to the story and accepts her gratitude and tells her she needs to go since her husband will be waiting for her outside. She rushes to the curb only to find that he has not arrived yet. She waits and waits, yet no sign of her husband. Probably he came, looked for her and left, thinking she got a ride from somebody else. Or, maybe, he just forgot. She was so absorbed by the actress's heartbreaking story, she lost track of time.

She starts walking towards home, still ruminating over the events and the little girl, stops for a second. No, she is not thinking about the play she just watched! The little girl and her mother whom she hardly knew have gotten to her. Well, that's understandable in a way. Here is a real life story that is no less creative than any supposedly real story presented on the stage.

The street is pretty much desolate but for a bike or a car whizzing by. This is one more thing, which is so different from her hometown. Back home, she never came across a street that looked so deserted. She thinks of that child and the mother, feels sorry for her. In this country, they say all people are equal yet some people have to struggle that much harder! It is like *all are equal but some are a little more equal*. Actually, she had her first lesson in this respect, soon after she has arrived in this country.



A month or so after she came to America, she went to the grocery store round the corner for vegetables, just two blocks away from her home. She thought she could walk to the store and finish her daily walk too along with shopping. As it turned out, she went to the store smiling and returned very annoyed.

Sundaram was busy with his paper for upcoming conference. He looked up, saw that his wife was not happy and asked, “What happened?”

Neelaveni took a glass of water and narrated the incident at the store.

As usual, she picked up a few items at the store, and rolled shopping cart to the checking counter. She noticed that a white woman in front of her had a cartful of items, wrote the check and the checker accepted it without batting an eyelid. Well, that was how it looked for Neelaveni at least. And then it was her turn. She had the items checked out, and wrote a check for \$16.95 and gave it to the checker.

The store clerk asked her to show her driver’s license. Neelaveni did not have one. Usually, she and Sundaram would go together and so she never had to produce a driver’s license. For the first time, she ventured into a shop alone and, look, what happened. Anyway, the fact that the checker would question her integrity annoyed her highly. Neelaveni told the checker that she had no license to show. Then the checker gave her a form to fill in and get it approved by the manager. The form asked for her name, address, place of work, if she does not have a job, her spouse’s job, color of eyes, hair and umpteen other details about her.

Neelaveni was ticked off. She pushed the cart to the side and said, “You keep the stuff to yourself. I don’t want them,” and hurried to the door.

The manager came and said to Neelaveni, “its okay, ma’am. Take the items. Sorry for the inconvenience.” He told the checker to accept the check.

Sundaram listened to the story and said, “Don’t you worry. People are weird in their own ways.”

Neelaveni looked at him, curiously. True her color had never been a problem for him. He did not care for it at the time of their wedding either.

In those days, she does not remember how many times she stared at her shining dark skin—her hands, feet, face in the mirror, each and every place she could lay eyes on—the color of dark clouds on a spring day, the color of the dark-skinned Lord Krishna, the color of dark-lined lotus

And then all those comforting words from everybody: Don’t you know what they say about lord Krishna? We call him the *Dark lord* but not the white lord for a reason, right? says grandmother; White is not even a color but a blend of seven colors, brother comments; crow is dark, koyil is dark, yet when the spring arrives, you’ll know who’s who, her Sanskrit teacher quotes the well-known adage.

Neelaveni did not find comfort in any of those words.

“Who’s going to come forward to marry this black girl,” she heard her mother whisper to a neighbor, dabbing tears. Neelaveni saw that and felt crushed.

Strangely though, her marriage had been fixed very easily. Sundaram, son of their neighbor Kamamma auntie, expressed his desire to marry Neelaveni. At first, Kamamma auntie objected quoting a popular proverb, *dark daughter-in-law begets dark babies*. Sundaram however said in no uncertain terms that he would not marry any other woman. Then Kamamma auntie changed

her position and started saying to everybody, “I’ve known the girl (Neelaveni) since she was a little child. She has been part of our family for so long. Besides, where is the guarantee that a girl from a family of strangers would conform to our traditions so comfortably? What if she makes my life miserable? Look at that Kotamma’s daughter-in-law. She is white all right, like a doll made of white flour, uh, talk about her attitude, that’s another story.” Kamamma came to terms with Sundaram’s proposal soon enough and the dust settled down pretty quickly.

The fact that Sundaram chose Neelaveni of his own free will helped her to ignore her skin color and gain confidence in herself. For her parents, it was *a shower of milk*, as the saying goes. The days of their fears that they might never be able to marry her were a thing of the past. The marriage was performed and the couple arrived in America.

After coming to America, Neelaveni learned a few other things about color. In India, the color of skin is a matter of appearance and beauty. In America, it is a matter of race and a whole lot of other things, a gamut of several emotions.

Often, she is mistaken for an African American. Neelaveni understood that only after she stopped wearing saris and switched to western clothes. In the beginning she wore nothing but saris. She even attempted to convince several others about the comfort the sari offers. Eventually, she changed into pants and shirts and then she found them just as comfortable if not more. For the first time, she understood that we can find convincing arguments for whatever we want to do, always. In course of time, she also removed bangles and other jewelry too. Then she stopped wearing the red dot on the forehead. She stopped wearing it because she is tired of explaining what it meant. There is no end to people’s curiosity about that one dot. In her mind, there are so many things about a culture. What is the big deal about the dot? She never asked why they are wearing eye make up or lipstick. How is the dot different? For her, it did not mean much. It was just as easy not to put it on. And then a new problem shot up. Now, people mistake her for an African American.

Neelaveni is not insulted for being mistaken for an African American. However, the ensuing stereotype images are hard to swallow. The way some smile, some pity, and a few others even express how they are ashamed of their thoughts about the skin color. That is something she resented. Hogwash, she muttered, grinding teeth.

A stand up comic once said, “Why do they call us black? All we have is one color and that is black. Look at them; they show all kinds of colors. They are red in the face when angry, turn pale when lost, black and blue if beat up, yellow with jealousy—they are the colored ones; actually, multicolored I’d say.”

She also understood that there are lots of people in America who did not even know that Telugu is a language and “Telugu people” refers to a race. On a rare occasion, somebody shows a tiny bit of their knowledge by asking an uncanny question, pulled out of the blue, and say, “So, has the situation for the Harijans improved yet?” with pitiful eyes. Ever so often she would feel annoyed and amused at the same time for their naivete and shallowness.

Neelaveni ruminates over the incident at the theater, as she walks towards her home. She could not figure out why that cousin did not show up at the theater as promised? Was she caught up in the traffic, or even worse, in an accident? Got pulled over for speeding? Neelaveni even thought if she made a mistake by taking the little girl into the theater instead of waiting outside? ... In that moment, she feels a shove on her shoulder and trips, almost. ... Somebody grabs her

handbag... “Hey,” she screams holding on to her bag ... then she looks up. Not one but three young boys surround her ... She is shivering ... shivering like a tender branch in a blast of wind ...chills creep down her spine, she lets go of the bag. The boys run with her bag, pushing her. She falls to the ground, screaming *help, help, somebody help*.

She falls and hits a rock; blood starts oozing from the gash on her forehead. She continues to scream *help, help, somebody help ... Oh, God, help me...*

After that, everything is hazy. She is losing consciousness, does not understand what followed. She vaguely sees somebody by her side. Who’s he? It’s so hard to open eyes... is he trying to help me?

With great effort, she opens her eyes and looks around. Next to her, there is a man, looks quite big; streaks of blood flowing down his dark cheeks, she could barely see in the light from the streetlight.

Neelaveni’s eyes move on to his neck, shirt, sleeves, and arms; the sight is horrendous, she is shivering, her heart races with super speed.

In that moment, the man turns toward her, gathers all the strength in his body and asks her, “You okay?” His voice is so weak; he could be miles away as he spoke.

She whispers, “Yes, I am. You?” She is not sure whether he has heard her or not. He is unconscious, his eyes are shut.

She wonders who this man could be? Apparently, he was prepared to *trade his life for mine or so it seems. Why? Did he think I was one of them?*

A car stops. The driver comes to them lying on the ground and asks if they need help. He calls 911 and gives them the location.

Within a few minutes, two squad cars and one ambulance arrive. Paramedics jump out of the ambulance and attend to the man and the woman. One of the paramedics asks Neelaveni if she is okay.

“I am fine. How’s he?”

“Are you related?”

“No. I don’t even know who he is. Just a man with a good heart, who came to my rescue. Is he okay?”

“He’ll be okay. Unconscious but he’ll be alright.”

Neelaveni turns towards the kind man that rescued her. Blood from the gash on his forehead is trickling down the side of his face slowly like a caterpillar. He has blood all over, streaks of blood all over his face, and arms, his white shirt and dark arms, splashed all over. She stares at him again. Streaks of blood is trickling from his nose, left ear and the corner of his mouth and drying up, and more blood on to the street, sinking into the dirt.

For the first time, the thought of her skin color is erased from her mind. In its place, a warm, crimson ray sprang, spreading to the horizon like a gush of spring at the top of the Tala Kaveri river.

(The Telugu original, *rangu tolu*, was published in [www.eemaata.com](http://www.eemaata.com), 2006)

## 5. MESMERIZED

It is four o'clock in the evening. Padmaja closes the book and turns toward the window. Snowflakes are flowing around forming into a thin veil. The city crew has not shown up yet to clear the snow from last night. These small streets are not exactly their favorite; do they consider these small streets their stepchildren? Last night it snowed quite big, darn it. The plow trucks have started working on the major streets though.

Padmaja goes to the window and looks out again. She has been seeing that woman in blue coat every day at the same time walking westward. She walks every day, rain or shine, sleet or snow; she has not missed a day for over a year now. For over month or so, Padmaja has started wondering about that woman--who she might be? Even she herself is not sure if that is simple curiosity or really wants to know who that might be.

She lives on a small street. Not many cars go on that road but for the eight families living on the street. Seeing a person on the street is almost like finding a heavenly lotus. If the devil comes this way he might wonder why there is no smell of humans around; that is how the street is. On the south side, on rare occasions she sees a couple of children, probably 5 and 6 year-old, probably from the house on the far right. Usually, their mother or father puts them in the car and drives them away. That's it. On very hot afternoons, once in a blue moon, she sees them riding their bikes. That's all there is as far as the signs of humans on this street. Sometimes it feels like it would not be any different from living in a heavily wooded forest. There were times, after she first moved to this place, when she wondered if she would see a bear or a lion one of these days! It is a far cry from the endless hustle and bustle back home. In the olden days, people used to go to the woods for penance because they needed a quiet place to meditate. Here this home could serve the same purpose. Unless one turns the TV on, one hears nothing. For her son, home means food and bed. And, the wife is an extra benefit for him. One look at Priya is enough to think that she might be considering all these amenities as the fruits of her past actions, her karma! She goes around performing her duties in a robot-like fashion. Think of it, the woman is two generations ahead, and educated as well, and has a job. Wherever she could have gotten this kind of detachment? They don't even look like they have any relationship.

Now Padmaja has gotten used to this utter soundlessness. The thought brought a vague smile on her lips.

Suddenly she looks up with a jerk. She has not noticed the time, lost in her own thoughts. Has she missed the lady on the street? She stands, walks to the window and peeks as far as she could see. There she is! Padmaja watches as the woman walks ten past the window, turns around and stops, watching the dog in front of her. Padmaja is annoyed. She never understands these people's love of dogs. For most of them, dogs mean more than human beings. For her, that is not right.

She could not hear the words but she notices that the dog-owner picked up the dog, held to her chest and probably was saying, "don't worry. He is a friendly dog." The woman moves farther to the right and probably is saying, "He may be a friendly dog but I am not dog-friendly." True, the dog owner may love her dog but where is the rule that everybody must love dogs. There are

forty-seven million human beings in the country who don't have a decent meal on any given day. And some of the dogs are receiving royal treatment. Shouldn't the fellow humans be their priority? What kind of moral values are these? Pch.

The woman in blue went around the dog and the dog-owner and moved on.

Padmaja returns to her chair and picks up the book she has been reading. She looks at the watch on the wall; five minutes past 4:00 p.m.

It is getting hard to focus on the book. After forty-five minutes, the woman will be on her way back. Why? Can't say but to wait for her has become a habit; developed rather unknowingly. Forty more minutes; how about start cutting vegetables for dinner--one way of passing time. She may start now and Priya will finish it after she got home. Priya told her several times not to cook but Padmaja decided to cook since she was feeling bored. Usually she cuts vegetables, and starts cooker with dal in it. Sometimes Priya does not like the vegetable Padmaja has picked; then she puts it away and start with another. But for that, there isn't much of a rift between them.

Padmaja opens the book again. She has her eye on the window and is also annoyed with herself a bit. She does not even know who that woman is, where she has come from, where she would go to; where she will end up ... nothing is known. Yet she is looking forward to seeing her as if she is a close relative; meaningless, irrational.

She looks at the watch again; ten minutes to go. Priya walks in.

"You're early today, are you okay?" Padmaja asks. Usually, she comes after 5:00. Now it is only 4:45.

"No reason, just done with work," she replies.

That's it, the conversation is over. Padmaja turns to the window. The other woman might show up any minute now ... but that does not happen. Suddenly, something else occurs to her. Why not get up and go out. Why didn't she think of that earlier? She gets up, puts on winter coat, and sneakers.

"Whereto?" asks Priya.

"Just ... walk a bit, be back in a few minutes."

"Now? It is getting cold, falling snow. I am afraid you might slip and fall."

"It's okay. I'll be careful."

"Why don't you wait. I'll take you to the mall. You can walk around there."

"We always go in the car. Let me walk on the street for fresh air."

"Okay, don't go too far. Don't go west. People in the area are not our type."

Padmaja nods and goes. Priya gives her the cane for support. Padmaja does not need a cane however she does not mind take it when she is walking in snow. She takes the cane and goes out. She couldn't stop wondering about what Priya has said, "People like us." Who are we and who are "people like us?" Let's be frank; we are not white either, come to think of it. No, we are not yet those who have all the virtues of the white folks; that's the difference. Yes, we are those who have earned entitlement to education, money and culture successfully. Probably those living on west side do not have education and money. And of course the culture, even if they had culture,

it does not count without education and money. “Our people” cannot accept whatever the other people possess may still be called culture.

As she keeps walking, she sees two boys coming toward her. One of them appears to be 18 or 19 years-old, could be older brother or father. The other boy is walking, holding the older boy's hand, and dragging his boots in the snow, might be just about four. He looks at Padmaja, squinting and smiles. The older boy looks at both of them and he too smiles.

Padmaja nods acknowledging his greeting. The boys are not “our people.” It is strikingly obvious as if it is writ large in invisible ink on their foreheads. Yet, their smiles spread serenity in the air. Soon the boys go past her and disappear behind her. She starts walking, arrives at a 4-way stop, walks a couple of hundred yards further and stops, unsure which way to go. She could not recognize anything on any side. She turns around and starts retracing her steps back to home.

She sees the boys again; apparently they also went somewhere and returning home probably. As they walk past her, the little kid sneaks behind the older boy's legs and extends his tiny hand shyly, and touches her coat. The older boy looks at both of them and smiles. Padmaja laughs loud this time, says hello to the little one and proceeds forward.

That day is over for Padmaja without seeing the woman she has gotten used to see everyday. That is a bit discouraging; yet, she is very much pleased for being shown the charm of friendship by those two boys on the west street. Her heart is floating in the air.

At home, she tells Priya the story of those two boys, “those people from the west side.”

“Oh,” says Priya casually, indifferent as usual.

Padmaja does not see the woman in blue the following day also. She is reminded of the two boys. For a second, she thought may be that woman in blue also has been going west to see only those two boys. She sits down with a pen and paper. She jots down:

For some,  
The friendship flows parallel  
Like Saraswati river  
Invisible and incomprehensible  
For them,  
Harmony is the “*Aura*” Express\*  
Like railway tracks  
They neither meet nor break

That is her first and last poetry in her life.

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(\* *Aura* in Telugu is an expression of surprise. Here it is used as a play upon the name of a popular train in South India, Howrah Express.)

(Published on [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net).)

## 6. SCARED

“Chitti dear, will you please go to the post office and mail this letter?”

“I will, grandma, later. I am studying for the exam.”

“It’s past three. The post office closes soon. You can study after mailing the letter, can’t you?”

“Okay, I’ll go. You’re always like this. You ask me to do something and won’t stop until it’s done.”

“Uh, is that so? Okay. I’ll find somebody else to mail it.”

“Never mind. I’ll go.”

“You know the way?”

“Will find out. I am new to the town, not dumb. Don’t I have to find my way to the exam center tomorrow? Isn’t it the same?”

“I guess. It’s too far away. Just go to the big market and go past three lanes, turn right. You can’t miss the red brick building on your left.”

“Okay, I’ll find out. Don’t worry.”

“Um. Maybe I should go with you?”

“Oh, not necessary, Grandma. Don’t worry. I can find the place. You don’t have to come with me. You’re not feeling well, and it is so hot out there.”

“All right. Be careful. Go straight to the post office and come back.”

“Don’t talk to me as if I’m a baby. Are you going to push me around like this even after I go to the college?”

“Oh yes. Forgot – a high school grad, all grown up!”

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I don’t understand why Grandma is so scared. Hardly a week since I’ve come here to take the test, she’s chewing me up, constantly on my case, ... be careful, be careful... What’s going to happen to me anyways? Like some monster is going to eat me up. What about her. She goes to the temple and lectures, doesn’t she? She won’t be back until after nine in the evening. Doesn’t she see that I’ll be worried too? On top of it, she tells me, you’re alone, be careful, don’t open the door to strangers ... Um. She’s the one that needs to be careful, with her heart condition and all that. I’m so scared for her, she might collapse in the middle of the street somewhere ... Um, Grandma! Always afraid of something or other... Afraid to go out, afraid to stay home, afraid of dark, afraid of new place, strange people, afraid to talk and afraid to keep quiet. .. What is this fear? Chha, so stupid, if you ask me....

Wait, what’s that? ... Who’s that? It looks like somebody is following me! ... Should I stop and look? ,, Ooh, that’s scary. Oh boy! He’s like a monster. WHO IS HE? Why follow me? Why? What does he want? Maybe, I should tell somebody? To whom? Na, no good, what can I say to them? After all, it is a public street. He has as much right to be on the street as I. That’s what

anybody would say. One more peek at him ... wow, soooo big, brawny ... I wish I'd left the gold chain at home. In fact, Grandma told me to leave it at home. Wish I'd listened to her. ... Maybe he's not following me ... Am I becoming like Grandma, always suspicious? I can turn back and see ... No question ... *he is following me*. Now what? Where are all the policemen? Not one shows when I need them... Um... Maybe, I *should* stop somebody on the street, and tell them I'm in trouble. Whom? That man? This woman? No, silly. They'd say I'm being silly. ..

Oh, no, where am I going? Did I pass three lanes or four? This idiot on my mind ... he made me lose my way! Should turn left or right? I can't remember. Oh, god, where are you? Where are you when I need you? Help me. There, that woman is looking nice, a kind of kindly.

"Ma'am, which way to the post office?"

"That way."

"I am coming from there. I missed the lane?"

"I guess so."

"Are you going there too?"

"No, not to the post office. I'm turning right at the next crossroad. You need to go further up and turn left. Are you new to this place?"

"Yes, ma'am, I came here just last week to take the high school diploma exam. I am staying with my Grandma. Thanks, ma'am."

There again, he also turned around, *he is following me*... I can't take this anymore, have to settle this once for all. If he wants to rob me, let him do so and be done with it.

"Hey, why are you following me?"

"Oh, child, did I scare you? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Well, I'm not scared. I want to know why you're following me."

"I don't know the way to the post office. I saw you're going there. I thought I'd follow you."

"How do you know I'm going to the post office?"

"Way back, there, I heard you ask somebody."

"You could've asked somebody yourself, couldn't you?"

"Dear child, I come from a small town; this is the first time for me to be in the city. I am afraid to talk to the city folks."

"You? Scared? That's funny. You look like you can take on ten rowdies in a snap!"

"Well, I'm big alright. You know we village men are used to eating millet and working hard in the fields. Getting big body is no big thing for us. But I'm afraid to talk. I ain't no educated and am afraid that folks laugh at my language."

"You? Afraid to talk with others? That's strange. I'd imagine you can scare away half a dozen husky fellows in a snap. All right. Hurry up, it is getting late, the post office closes soon."

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(The Telugu original, *rangu tolu*, has been published on eemaata.com. August 26, 2010)



## 7. TOP POCKET

“I want a new skirt and top,” Parimala said.

“Just last week we got new clothes made for you, 'cause you're starting at new school. You want new clothes again,” mother said.

“Okay, I don't need the skirt, just a new top. Without a new top, I am not going to go to school,” said Parimala.

“That's cute. Princess wants a dress a day?” mother said, smiling.

“I don't want one a day. I want a different dress only on the day I have the English language class,” said Parimala seriously.

“What happened in the English language class?” Akka asked. She had realized long time back that this kind of desires would originate only in the school.

Parimala remained silent.

“Okay, we'll see. Bobby's birthday is coming up next month. I will have new clothes made for both of you at that time.”

“No, I want it now,” Parimala insisted.

“Nice, very nice, as they say, like the deer up and run in the same moment. Don't you know you don't get everything and anything as you please right away? What's the urgency anyways?” mother said, annoyed.

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The day before.

School was in session. Parimala set foot in the tenth class room, wearing new skirt and top and holding the books and the geometry box tightly to her chest. All new faces; her heart was beating like a little engine ... chuk, chuk ... New school, new faces, new class, new teacher, new books, new skirt and new top—everything new, new, new ... Just last week, mother had taken her to the store, had her pick her favorite cloth with flower prints for the skirt and mango shoot tinted cloth for the top. She got the outfit made by Ameer Saheb who was sitting on the porch with his sewing machine. Everything fell in place perfectly. Yet, the new class was new class. Parimala, with her face down and sidelong glances, as if she was going to rob a bank, walked into the classroom and looked around. Teacher had not come in yet. All the boys were sitting on the right side in two rows and girls on the left side. Usually, smart and well-behaved students would sit in the front rows. Those who had not studied, had not done their homework, and those who would engage in drawing funny pictures sit in the back rows.

Parimala stood at the door and watched them. All the children were talking, giggling noisily and making faces.

Her eyes completed one round and stopped on the two girls in the second row. She was not sure why but felt like there was something special about them. Between the two, the one on the far end noticed Parimala and smiled. Then she whispered something in the ear of the girl next to her.

The second girl turned around, looked at her and also smiled. Parimala waited for what felt like ages and slowly walked towards the two girls. The two girls moved invitingly and made room for Parimala on the bench. The girl who moved and made room for her asked, "What is your name?"

She was fair-skinned, oval-faced and somewhat skinny. She looked so delicate, probably the slightest touch could make her blood clot or she might faint, thought Parimala. She said her name was Ramani. The second girl's skin was wheat-colored; her eyes seemed to be saying "I saw you somewhere"; there was a naughty smile on her lips, looking as if it was the place of origination for the naughty smile. Her name was Visala, she said.

"Parimala," she said in a voice barely audible.

"Shh," somebody from behind alerted them to be quiet.

Parimala stopped talking with Ramani, turned around, looked at the teacher who was just walking into the class; she was flabbergasted, her jaw dropped, and her heart started beating twice as fast. The teacher was also the landlord, from whom her parents rented the apartment. Just two weeks back they had moved in. Ever since they had moved, the landlord had been giving them plenty regarding what they could do and what they could not or should not do in that apartment.

The teacher went to his desk, turned and looked at the faces in the class and said, "Hum, so, we have a new girl in the class," watching Parimala with a piercing look.

He opened the attendance register and started calling out the names. "Present, sir," each student was responding dutifully.

"Prameela," teacher called.

"It is Parimala, sir, not Prameela," she said furtively.

"PARIMALA," he said gritting his teeth, as if he was ready to devour her.

Somebody in the back row snickered.

"Silence!" the teacher shouted.

It was the English language class. "Today, we will study a short story about the Pandava princes learning how to shoot the bow from their teacher Dronacharya," he said. Dronacharya asks each of the princes what they saw on the tree. Only Arjuna says he did not see the tree nor branches; not even the bird but only the eye of the bird. It is a story about focus.

Parimala buried her head in the book. A girl from behind poked her with her pencil, causing her to jerk. Parimala was startled and the geometry box in her lap fell on the floor with a bang. The items in the box—a ruler, a compass, a pencil, an eraser and a quarter of a rupee—all scattered all around.

She was frightened; she bent down quickly and started picking the pieces, barely looking at the teacher for fear he might yell at her again.

The children in the class were making funny noises in a low pitch.

"Silence," the teacher shouted again and told Parimala, "Come here."

She put the items back in the box, put the box on the bench and went to him.

“Why did you bring that spice rack to my class?” he yelled. He was ready to all kinds of fuss, short of slapping her.

Parimala had no answer.

“Do you need that trash box in the English language class?”

“No, sir. It is not needed in the English language class, sir.”

“From now on, never bring it to my class again. Understand? This goes for everybody. Nobody is allowed to bring the geometry box to my class,” he issued a memorandum to the entire class.

Twenty pairs of eyes turned toward Parimala. They all said, “All this, because of you!”

The class was over for the day. The two girls, who had made room for her earlier, were walking home. They lived in the same neighborhood as Parimala. She was walking a few steps behind them.

“Teacher seems to be mad at you for whatever reason,” Ramani commented.

“What did I do? Why would he be mad at me?” Parimala was confused.

“Who knows? You are renting the apartment from him, aren’t you? Probably, something has to do with that.”

Parimala could not understand the logic but decided then and there not to bring the geometry box to the language class again. But then, where could she put her pencil, eraser and the quarter of a rupee she was bringing for milk? She could not hold everything in her palm all the time.

The following day, mother who had compared her *to the deer up and running* changed her mind by next morning. “Might as well get it done now. One errand done is one less thing to worry about,” she thought. Besides, the tailor takes his own sweet time to make the outfit.

That afternoon, mother took Bobby and Parimala to the store. Picking the right cloth for Bobby’s shirt and pants was over in a snap but picking the right cloth for Parimala’s outfit was another story. By the time she picked the cloth she liked, the sun was down. Mother paid for the items and went to the tailor Ameer Saheb on the porch.

Ameer sahib took measurements.

“Add a pocket to my top,” Parimala said.

Ameer sahib was confused. He looked at mother.

She was also surprised. “What? Pocket for the top? What do you mean?” mother asked.

“Well, Bobby is getting a pocket for his shirt, isn’t he? Why can’t I have one?”

“Well, he is *mogavaadu*.<sup>1</sup>”

“So? He is *magavadu* and I am *aadavaadu*. I want the pocket.”

“What is *aadavaadu*?” Mother said, laughing.

“Pocket would not look good on a girl’s top, madam,” Ameer sahib said.

“It would look good for me,” Parimala insisted.

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<sup>1</sup> *magavaadu* maga is male, and *vaadu* a masculine suffix. Parimala was playing on the word by adding *vaadu* to *aada* which means female.

“All right. Let us do it. Put a small square on her top as well,” mother said. It was getting late; she was worried about her husband’s supper. He must eat on time, always, as a matter of principle.

It was decided to put a pocket on the top and the next question was where—on the chest like boy’s shirt? Or, on the side, like grandfather’s kameej?

“I don’t know all that. All I know is I want a pocket on my top, to keep my pencil, eraser and such stuff.”

“If it is for keeping the pencil and the eraser, the pocket on the chest may not be a good idea. They may fall out of the pocket when you jump and skip,” Ameer sahib explained the logistics of it.

“All right. Put it on the side,” Parimala agreed.

It was half past six by the time the issue had been resolved successfully. “Come on, let’s go,” mother pushed them into a rickshaw and got home anxiously.

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The following day, she went to the Telugu grammar class. Parimala was afraid of her English teacher but that was not the case with her Telugu teacher. His explanations of Telugu poems fascinated her, always. She understood every bit of grammar he taught.

That day, he was explaining the story of the great grammarian Panini. The poem said Panini was very handsome—his face was like full moon, peaceful and bright, he was tall and well-built, he would serve the teacher nonstop and without complaint; however, he could never recite a single poem in his life.

Parimala liked that story very much. She was taken by the cute twist in the last line—a wonderful personality with no brains! More than that, the phrases describing Panini ended in third person singular suffix *vaadu*. That word brought up another question to her mind—the one that mother had asked the day before.

After the class ended and all the students left, she approached the teacher. Ramani and Visala were waiting behind her.

“Sir! I have a question,” she said.

“Yes, dear! What is it?” he asked with a smile. The teacher was very fond of her; he was impressed with her aptitude.

“The pronominal ending *vaadu*, I am confused about its usage. *Vaadu* is singular and *vaaru* is plural, right?”

“Yes, dear.”

“*mogavaadu* is singular and *mogavaaru* is plural.”

“That is correct.”

“Can’t we follow the same logic and say, I mean work backwards and say *aadaavaru* for plural and *aadavaadu* for singular?”

Teacher laughed but Parimala did not. She was confused, seriously. She wanted to know the answer.

Teacher looked at her and said gently, “Grammar does not explain why things cannot be in a certain way, child! It explains only how the prevalent words have changed in course of time. Let’s say you would start using *aadavaadu* and several others pick up and continue to use it on a regular basis. Then it becomes the norm. Probably, you should do so after you’ve become a notable writer.” He said partly in jest and partly in seriousness.

“I am going to start it even now,” she said. She felt free to speak her mind in his presence always.

“I don’t think so. You’d better wait until you’ve earned the reputation as a great writer. Then, they’d call it *arshaprayogam* (poetic license). If you do it now, they’d just question your language skills. How did this idea start anyway?”

Ramani, who was standing next to her, pulled Parimala’s side pocket and said, “Here, because of this pocket.”

“What? ... No, it’s okay. I never saw a pocket on a top. That’s why said ...” he said, staring into her face, and trying to cover his surprise.

“Well, that is our Parimala!” Visala said.

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Parimala kept mulling over it all night. She could not understand the logic behind the pocket being gender-related. One possibility could be—long time ago, when mother, her mother and grandmother had not gone out at all, probably there had never been a need to walk around with pencils and erasers and there had been no need for pockets either. Now, for her, there was a need for her to carry the pencil and the eraser and therefore the pocket was also needed. Ever so often she had lost one or the other and kept buying new things again and again. Akkayya offered to make a little bag for her but Parimala did not think it was a good idea. She still would have to remember to carry it all the time. A pocket on the other hand would take care of it by itself. She would not have to worry about those little things constantly. Then, she could use her brain for other purposes! That was how she convinced herself.

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That was fifteen years ago. Now, Parimala was living in America. Last month she came to India for a brief visit.

She went to visit Ramani. Ramani was elated to see her. She jumped to her feet and hugged Parimala with all her heart. “Wow, after soooooo long. I never thought I could see you again.... How’re you? Tell me everything... Sometimes Visala and I see your stories in magazines and talk about you.”

Parimala was thrilled to hear that her friends had read her stories and thought about her.

Ramani said, “Come on, let’s visit Visala. She lives in Hyderabad. Now she came here yesterday to see her older sister. Let’s go.”

All the three sat down in Visala’s home and kept chatting about their school days, the short teacher, the math teacher and so many other things.

“Remember, you were the only one in those days to come to class wearing a top with a pocket? We used to admire your guts and laugh,” Ramani said.

Parimala laughed, “Why didn’t you all have tops with pockets?”

“How? I had no choice but use up all the clothes my older sister had outgrown of and handed down to me,” Visala sighed, recalling the life of her childhood days.

“I ran out of luck in that area as well. My sibling happened to be a boy. I wish they had let me wear his clothes. Then I would have gotten pockets automatically. It didn’t occur to me, to be frank,” Ramani lamented.

“Where is our teacher?” Parimala asked.

“He is staying home, retired.”

“Let’s go, see him,” Parimala said, recalling those times with her teacher.

“Let’s go, hurry. He will be home now. If we don’t go now, we may miss him. He will go to the park,” Visala said.

Teacher was sitting in an easy chair on the porch and reading Bhagavatam. Next to him, his wife Kamamma was sitting on the floor and cutting beans.

As he heard the gate squeak, he looked up and asked, “Who’s that?” adjusting his glasses.

Kamamma recognized them and said, “the girls, Ramani and Parimala,” and turned to them and invited them kindly, “Come in. How’re you?”

“Who? Pocket Parimala?” teacher said teasingly.

Parimala smiled shyly. She was thinking “why on earth it occurred to me and only to me, in those days.”

Kamamma went in and returned with buttermilk in three glasses and served them.

“You don’t have to,” they protested mildly and took the glasses.

“So, you are in America now. Our granddaughter came to visit us last month. All those pants, shirts, and all that... Probably, you’re also the same. Lots of pockets, head to foot,” the teacher said, commenting cheerily.

“Lots of pockets and lots of money in those pockets ... is that right?” Kamamma said, smiling.

Parimala looked away as she mumbled, “No, not so in my case.”

Kamamma said it lightly but, after watching Parimala’s face, wished she had not said it.

Parimala however collected herself quickly and laughed, “Now no pocket but this bag only,” she said, holding out her handbag. Then she took a pen from the bag and gave it to him, “I brought this little gift for you.”

He took it cheerfully and said, “bless you.”

Ramani said, “Wherever she is and however many pockets she may have, our Parimala is always the same old Parimala, sir. As always, her pockets are full of papers and pencils, nothing else.”

Teacher said, “I heard you’ve been writing stories. You possess the gift of Goddess Saraswati’s blessings. I knew even then that you would become a great writer. I am really happy for you.”

“No great writer, sir. Just scribbling a few lines whenever I feel like and whatever comes to my mind,” Parimala said modestly and feeling shy for the compliment.

“That’s what I am saying too—safekeeping. Pocket to hold pencils, and pencils to hold the heart.”

Suddenly, silence dropped on them like a thin veil, barely perceptible. For some reason, nobody found words to say.

“It’s getting dark. We’d better go,” Ramani said, getting up to leave.

“Wait,” Kamamma went in and returned with *paan* leaves, fruits and *kumkum*. She put *kumkum* on their foreheads and gave them the *paan* leaves and fruits.

Parimala had forgotten these traditions, almost. Today, suddenly, she felt like following that tradition. Tears gathered in her eyes. Parimala bent forward and touched the couple's feet, seeking their blessings.

All the three girls said goodbye one more time and walked toward the gate. At the gate, Parimala stopped and looked through the corner of her eyes; she saw him dabbing his eyes with the towel on his shoulder. She heaved a small sigh and hastened to join her two friends.

On her way home, she kept chanting as if it was a mantra—*pocket to hold the pencils, and the pencils to hold the heart*.

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(The Telugu original *Jebu* has been published on [Telugu thulika.wordpress.com](http://Telugu.thulika.wordpress.com) and the English version on [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net).)

## 8. MY LITTLE FRIEND

Neela sat down with her laptop to surf the Internet for Telugu stories and poems. Her father had given it to her when she had started taking the Computer Science courses in college the previous year. Her mother never liked it though. Up until that time, Neela and her mother had been friends, always talking, laughing, bickering for little things and making up. They'd been more like two teenagers rather than mother and daughter until now. Ever since Neela got the laptop, things changed dramatically; she was sitting there ogling on the screen and enjoying her own private moments, actually hours on end, all by herself. For her mother, the room turned frighteningly quiet.

"I'm going to auntie's next door. Viswam uncle may come to visit us. Talk to him. I'll be back soon," her mother said.

"What can I talk to him? He is twice my age," Neela said.

"He is a human being unlike that *sruti*<sup>2</sup> box," her mother said. That's what she called the laptop, a drone.

Neela shook her head briskly and turned to the story on the screen. She was a habitual reader and the Internet offered her a wide range of selections to quench her thirst. She even wrote a couple of poems and posted them on her blog.

The icon on the lower left corner chimed announcing new mail. She clicked on it.

"Your poem is beautiful. I enjoyed it a lot. I see you're perceptive. - Radha."

Neela was happy to see the first mail of commendation on her writing.

"Thanks," she replied.

Within a few seconds, she received another mail. "I was wondering if you had written any other poems. Are they available on the web?"

Neela was surprised and amused. She replied, smiling, "Oh, no. Just started. Actually, this is the first that's caught anybody's eye. -:)"

"You're talented. Keep it coming. -:)"

Neela replied "Okay," and signed off for the day.

A week later, she saw a poem on another site with similar theme as hers. She wondered if Radha had seen it. She seemed to be an avid reader like herself. Neela thought for a few seconds and then decided to give it a shot. She wanted to know what Radha thought about the poem.

"Did you see this?. What'd u think?" Neela included the link and clicked on 'send'.

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing. What'd you think of the poem," replied Radha.

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<sup>2</sup> Sruti box is an instrument, serving the purpose of drone in concerts.



“Dunno. Feels like there’s somethin’ to it, holl’rin at me. Then again, something is missing, I think. Or is it me -Λ?”

“I don’t think its u. =^D.”

Messages on the poem flew back and forth. Between the two, Neela started feeling like she was learning something new about poetry and Radha was elated that she found somebody to share her thoughts. That was the beginning of their daily chat via LCD screen. Personally, they’d never met and known nothing about each other.

One day, Neela asked, “What are u doing? u also a CS student?”

“No.” The response was brief. Radha thought of asking what did CS meant but didn’t. She didn’t feel like letting the person know that she was no student, CS or any other for that matter.

“I’m studying CS in Hyderabad, 2 yr,” Neela emailed back, hoping to get a reply on par with hers.

“Oh, I see. I am in America, and wondering about the same--what am I doing here? :p.”

Neela looked at the emoticon and smiled. For a second, she wondered if she was asking for trouble, could this person be a net prowler or a wacko? Then she pondered over other possible scenarios: Radha said she had attended college for one year. Maybe while she was in her second year, she had one of those supersonic weddings. Lately it became common for young men of Telugu heritage to come home on a two-week vacation, find a bride and marry right away. Traditionally, it could take months even years to arrange a marriage. But now, there is always a pundit who could find a super auspicious moment per lunar calendar to perform the wedding within the same two weeks any time of the year.

Neela persuaded herself not to worry; her gut feeling told her so. After all, there was no denying that she’d been having interesting conversations with this person, regardless of who she was.

“You’ve got mail,” the mailbox chimed.

“Did you read The Clear Day of Light?” Radha asked.

“Never heard of it. Who’s the author?” replied Neela.

“Anita Desai.”

“Again, nope, never heard o’r. I’m reading the Tipping Point. Awesome,” emailed Neela.

“:p. Never heard o’it.”

“u r talkin a lot abt books b’fore my time. u should read some current ones too. :p.”

“My grandmother was a voracious reader, got herself a huge personal library. :p.”

“Ah,” said Neela and signed off.

“Today, I saw the movie “Chak de India”. Do u get Indian movies there?” said Neela.

“Of course, they show Hindi movies here. I’m not interested in them though. Me going to movies is very rare. I would like to watch only Telugu movies. The last movie I watched was *sagarasangamam*, I think,” replied Radha.

“What? -:). That was made before I was born :D”

“Yeah, ;).”

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For a couple of weeks now they'd been exchanging emails. Radha sat in front of the computer and went over the emails again. Books—dated and current, Movies—old and new, Songs—old and new, Favorite movie stars—two generations apart. Yet, there seemed to be a connection ... Her eyes glowed. Clearly, Neela and she belonged to two different worlds, literally—from either side of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and entrenched in two different worlds of books and movies. Radha remembered the game of four-poles she and her friends used to play in her village in her childhood. Four kids stand holding on to four poles like the four bases in baseball, and run from pole to pole. A fifth kid tries to knock one of them out while running from one pole to the next. No two kids could hold on to the same pole at the same time. Despite the differences, the emails continued. It had become an addiction for them. Both enjoyed and pursued this new wave of friendship fervently.

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Neela had not received her daily email in two days. She sat there staring at the mailbox on the lower left corner of the screen. There was mail but not the one she was waiting for. Finally, she decided to send one herself.

“Hello, what're u doing?”

She waited for a few minutes. There was no response. She was getting restless. Was Radha busy with something important? Out of town? Left in a hurry? Fell ill? Couldn't she send a line before leaving?

Somewhat disconcerted, she kept surfing the web. There was a story she knew Radha would enjoy very much. It was by one of her favorite writers. Hesitantly she clicked on Compose. “Hey, Radha, I just finished reading a story, “Under the Mango Tree” by Sankaran. Did u see that? Lemme know what u think.”

After an hour or so, the mailbox flashed.

Neela's heart raced.

“Ammamma [grandmother] is sick.”

“I am sorry. What is it, fever? Did she go to the doctor?”

It was a while before Neela got another message. Then arrived another mail.

“Ammamma likes you very much.”

It didn't make sense. Who was sick, Radha or her grandmother?

“Are u okay?”

“I'm worried.”

“Don't worry, Ammamma will get well soon.”

“I'ope so. She likes u a lot. She calls you ‘my li'le frien’.”

Now Neela was really confused. There seemed more to it than she had known or so it seemed.

“What'd ya mean?” she emailed back.

“Ammamma ‘n u been writtin to each othe, aren't u?”

Neela was dumbstruck. It started making sense, vaguely. She pulled herself together and asked, "I didn't know she is your grandma."

"me worried."

Neela was going to type in "Don't worry."

The screen chimed again. One more mail. "Is it okay if I mail you? Ammamma tells me everything u 2 talk."

Neela replied quickly, "Yes, of course, u can rite to me. Tell me how's she doing. btw, what's your name?"

"I will. I'm Rahul. I am nine and a half, in 5 grade."

Neela burst into a big laugh. She was chatting with a boy not even half her age!

Rahul went off like a volley of tennis balls from a shooter, typing away how Ammamma had been afraid even to touch the keyboard and how he had showed her to log in. ... He said he had given her his ID and showed her how to surf the web for Telugu stories, write comments, and send emails. At first, amamma was shy since her English was not good. He told her that there are no grammar rules on the Internet, and showed her even to put the emoticons in her messages.

Neela began to mull over with a big grin: Why didn't Radha garu tell me that she was twice my age? Afraid that I might not want to talk to an older woman? How can I tell her I did not think she was old, not even for one second. But then again, maybe she may have gotten that impression when I mentioned about the little conversation I've had with mother about Viswam uncle.

Neela decided to leave the things as they were. It was beautiful that Radha was enjoying their friendship. Suddenly something else crossed her mind. She quickly turned the computer on and emailed Rahul, "Don't tell amamma about this little conversation we just had. Okay? It's going to be our little secret."

"Can I email you though?"

"Yes, of course. You are my new friend." And then she added, "Now, you go and do your homework. Don't worry, Amamma will be okay."

"Okay."

That night, Neela jotted down in her diary, "Today I found a new friend. I can say he is 'my little friend'."

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## 9. FRIENDS FOREVER!

I saunter along the river, actually a tributary of the river Trinity, which runs by my apartment complex. I watch the tiny ripples weaving through the wind, taking clues from its direction. Occasionally a restless fish pops up into the air and dips back into the water creating ripples in circular motion. The loosely hanging branches of the weeping willows sway as if recording the wind speed. I stop for a few minutes and make a note of the items the stream is carrying--stray straws, foam cups, empty cans and what not to far off shores without thinking twice who has thrown them into its water or why, I suppose. It is like she has imbibed the preachings of Sankara and Patanjali--the tenet of detachment intuitively.

Little Muscovy ducks with white beaks, glistening like pieces of a broken china plate, float on the waves blissfully. Female mallards with their brood, wood ducks, wood storks are floating around in the water. A mallard duck rises barely above the water, flies three yards splashing the water with its feet and settles down.

I have tried to capture that moment so many times but could never get it right. But then again, it is one of those moments--so many of them have passed in my life with some splash and no permanent record.

I thought of the question again - *how one grows fond of another?* I know there is one simple answer--she likes you, you're a nice person, a good listener, she misses home and you fill in, a surrogate ... One can even argue that we two like the same movies, the same authors, the same veggies. ... Somehow I am not convinced that is all there is to it, that just is not enough for me. In the past sixty-five years, so many people have come and gone in my life. Right from the high school days, there has always been at least one person who has avowed eternal friendship to me and disappeared in course of time, nothing lasted forever.

Lately, I am beginning to wonder if there is such thing as a "friend forever" at all. And, I must admit, it is confusing to me; the question never leaves me.

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"Come on, let's be honest. Who can tell why one likes another? All right, I don't know, I give up. You tell me how it happens," Veechika laughs.

A couple of minutes pass, she says again, "Uh, it is like the question of the giant Bhetala in the Bhatti Vikramarka stories. I am glad you didn't say, *your head would crack into thousand pieces if you knew the answer but refused to give it* ... ha, ha .. and probably I should be thankful for that. Well, I can ask you why on earth you've got this question in the first place. Um. Well, I don't know and frankly don't care, my dear Pinni. All I can say is right now I am fond of you because you are the nicest person on earth," she says with a serious look on her face.

I smile vaguely. I have heard it, one too many times.

She says, "I am a kind of down lately, Pinni, feeling lost. It's two months since I've been here, right? All these itty bitty social customs are beyond me, I can never get used to them. You can't visit somebody without calling them first, never show up without notice--all these are getting to me. I can't, just can't get used to the idea. Luckily, I've got you. I know you're not all that excited

about me. No, it's okay, I understand, you don't have to pretend you enjoy my company ... yea, yea, okay, just kidding. I'm sure you would've told me if you have other things to do. You're a peach, Pinni, you are for keeps. When I talk to you, it feels like I'm talking to my mom or big sister, it's sooooo cool. Why, look at Jaggu, my uncle's son. He lives in Houston, barely a 4-hour drive. We grew up in the same neighborhood, went to the same school. I called him as soon as I got here. Can you believe it? He barely said two words and hung up. He said he'd call me later, uh, never heard from him again, not so much as a um from him. I know, I know, you are going to say I would do the same, chirp the same lingo after a few months, and that's part of this culture. Uh, no, no way, I can never speak like that. You may you flog me but you can't make me say such stupid lingo. Let me ask you this. Yes I am asking 'cause I am stupid, I admit. All our people change into a totally new species as soon as they set foot on this land, why? Where is the need to change our values and our mode of thinking? They can make some changes in order to get by in this country but why do they have to forget our family values, interpersonal relationships, that is so natural in our close-knit families? Yeah, yeah, everybody talks the same cliché - *you cannot live unless you jump into the mainstream headlong and swim along, isn't that what you've come here for? Isn't it to prove your brain? That is the main reason, isn't it?* ... No, not for me, that doesn't work for me. I don't think that is all that matters to me. I want people. Our own people are standing at arm's length as if I am an untouchable; that gives me the creeps, you know!"

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I remember the day she came to America. She called me the second day after she had arrived in America.

"Hello! Who's this?"

"Me, Veechika, don't you remember? It's ten years since we've met, I think. You came to India for a brief visit. We met at my sister's wedding. ... Yes, I am in America now. Arrived two days back. ... No, I don't like it here. ... No, no, I am not crying. This water does not agree with me, I suppose, got sore throat. I am anxious to see you, there is a lot to talk about. Coming Saturday? Of course, I can. Yes, I can make it upcoming weekend. Let me check the flights. Oh, no, I can manage the ticket, don't worry about the fare. In fact, it is not just about the money, you know. I will have to check with my professor. Probably, I can talk to him and skip the class for one day. I must admit, I am really confused though ... I mean about their teaching methods. What are they for, if I know everything? Anytime I have a question, they ask me what I think, or suggest I find out myself. If I can find out the answer, what are they getting paid for? ... anyway, first I need to work on understanding their method of teaching."

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I go for walks by the river every day. I saw a middle-aged woman about three months back I believe. She said her son, daughter-in-law and a seven-year-old granddaughter live here, she came to visit them. They live in the same complex, in the building across from mine. After that, I saw her almost every day, sometimes two or even three times a day.

It started out as meeting on the path by the river, soon became she visiting me in my apartment. "Are you home? Silly question, ha ha. I knew you'd be home. I was hoping you'd be home. Actually, thought you might be waiting for me, ha, ha, what can I say! My day is not complete unless I bother you with my blabbering. ... What, you're not bored? Yeah, yeah, ... What else

you'd say? You're not going to tell me that you're bored by my chitchat, no, no, that's not in your character."

That is the usual opening. After a while I would hear about some thing or other happened in her home, to her grandchild, to her parents back home, ... there is always a story to tell.

"Anyway, know what happened today? Well, today is my birthday. Didn't I tell you? Oh, no? Okay, it is, anyway. And, you know how my daughter-in-law is. Always makes lot of fuss for every little thing. Um, yes, she bought a sari for me. Guess how she handed it to me, no, you can't imagine even in your wildest dream As the saying goes, *graduated from college yet knows not how to clean the rice*. I couldn't believe she did not know even a simple thing like--one should not give a sari without blouse piece to a married woman. She gave it to her daughter and the kid brought it to me and threw it in my lap. You tell me, is that the way to give a sari to a respectable woman?

"You may say, she was trying to teach our values to the child. I don't think so. Had she really thought on those lines, she should have showed it by doing exactly the way we do it in our tradition. She should bring the sari, a blouse piece, fruits, flowers, *kumkum*, turmeric, and paan, and give it to me, bow before me, and seek my blessings. That is the tradition. I would never have had a child throw a sari at another woman so casually. You can take it anyway you please, but to me, it was humiliating. I was so angry yet remained calm though. After all, I am not going to stay here forever, why bother ..."

In a strange way, that story got to me. I remember the times when I was trying to teach our values to my daughter, be a good mother. At the time I did not realize the difference between our values and the values she is growing up with, the American values! Come to think of it, I was not doing it right either, maybe.

I have heard umpteen stories from her in the next few months. She would show up like clockwork, tell what happened on the night before, that morning, that afternoon ... I started feeling like her *ishtasakhi*!<sup>3</sup> Of course, there is a reward for it too. All those gift--veggie dishes I did not relish, books I did not care for, and the prepaid phone card with four minutes left on it. Every time I would tell her to stop bringing me those gifts, and she would give the same response , "Oh, no, it's okay, you can use them. If you don't take, it will go to waste." That was a bit annoying to me--taking something because the other person could not use it. I told my daughter and she put it in a different perspective. She said they (meaning we Indians) think I am protesting 'cause it is polite to do so. Anyway, the gifts started tapering off even as her visits became fewer.

After her husband joined her in the States, her visits became few and far between. Whenever she called or stopped by, it was only to tell me how busy she had become mostly because of her husband, who needed her all the time for every little thing. I heard no complaints in her voice though and that's good, I thought.

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<sup>3</sup> In the old days, kings used to employ young women to work as "bosom friend" to princesses, called *ishtasakhi*, (lit. a friend after one's own heart). In modern times, especially in these times of one's own space and isolation, friendships are formed for a wide variety of reasons, not necessarily "after one's own heart". For prince, the term is *veduka chelikaadu*.)

As the day of her departure approached, she kept insisting that I was her "lifetime friend", would call me from India, write to me, stay in touch with me.

On the day of her departure, she swore one more time that I was her best friend she ever had and left. As you may guess, I never heard from her again. I do not know where she is now and what she is doing. For all I know, she might be repeating the same stories to someone else in some other town. Ha, the mysterious world of being a "friend forever"! Amazing.

I keep thinking about her for a different reason though. Her stories about her daughter-in-law missing our values make me think about my way of teaching our values to my daughter, who is being raised in a different culture. I must admit, I have to thank her for playing "friend forever!" routine. Friend for a reason, as my daughter would say! It helped me to learn about myself.

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"What!! Six months already since I called you? Wow, I didn't even realize six months went so fast," says Veechika on the other end. "Well, lot of things have happened during these six months. Actually, that's the reason I couldn't call you. Ha, ha, I know you will laugh but what do you know about life here? Oh, no. I didn't mean it that way, I know you know how life is here like. What can I do, you tell me. You know for sure the kind of education in colleges here. These professors, they make us do their work and our work too. What do I mean? Well, I've told you before, aren't I? Always asking me, *what do you think? or telling me to try to find out. Go to the library, read ..., search on the Internet ....* that's his teaching! I am telling you, I never saw this method of teaching. If I can find out everything for myself, why take his class? And then he tells me how smart I am and that I only need to put in a bit of time, and I can find the answer myself. Uh. You may not believe this, with all this work and worry, I am down to half my size. These studies and the insipid food are killing me. ... I know you also believe that I am very smart and I only need a bit of push to show my mettle. ... Okay, I have to go, have to write two papers by Monday. I will call you after I am done. ... I promise, no, no more silly excuses. You know, who else is there for me to pour my heart out if not you. Only you are there for me, you're a good listener and that's what I like about you. ..."

I swallow the words that come to my mind. I want to say I don't always enjoy being at the receiving end, always listener, and never a talker. I want to say each time I try to say something, she cuts in and disrupts my line of thought. But ... no, I can't. For some reason, I do not even see any point in saying so.

"Anyway, I was going to tell you about my classmate, Avinash Ghosh. What? I didn't tell you about him before? Uh, I thought I did. Anyways, we've been seeing each other for a while, well not exactly seeing, we went to movies a couple of times, had lunch or dinner, ... ha ha ha, yes, it sure looks like a date, isn't it? Well, it is a date if you say so. ... I know I should've told you. Here, listen, I want you to meet him. How about next weekend? Are you free? Well, I know you're laughing, but you also know the way things are here. Back home, time for school means time for school and marriage only after education is completed; one after another in a sequence. Here, while you are in college, you also start planning for future--both home and job. ... ..

"Hello, Pinni, uh, ... um ... no, I'm not crying. I'm really upset, really really upset. You know that idiot Ghosh said I needed to grow up, uh, me grow up? I did not mention it to you, he is a wimp you know, always complaining he should have had this, had that, people don't see he's a genius, ... you say it and he has got it, nothing misses his list of complaints .... ... you know what, I think

I am glad I dumped him. He thinks he dumped me but in fact he is the *dumpee*. ... ..  
... ..

"Hi Pinni, me again. I know, I know, I should have called you. Did I tell you about Helaku. He's in my class. Do you know Helaku means Full of sun in the Native American language. I am so excited about learning all these things about them. I want you to meet him. But he wants to take me to Albuquerque for the upcoming weekend. He said it was a surprise for me. It seems it is a great place to learn about American Indians. There are lot of similarities between their culture and our culture. I thought I might as well take upon his offer, I've been always interested in their culture you know. ... I will call you after I return from the trip. Yes, of course, I will send you pictures. ... Oh, I forgot, don't tell mom, please. She will freak out, don't worry, I will tell her myself ... yes, ... soon, bye for now, I have to go ... ..  
... ..

"Pinni, are you there? ... Oh, you're home, how come you didn't pick up the phone. Ah, sleeping? Sorry, did I wake you up? Ha, ha. Of course, you're up now. Anyway, I am thinking of coming to visit you next weekend, if you're free. I want to introduce Ram Singh to you. ... um, ... Yes, I broke up with Helaku. .. um ... I don't know ... just ... just didn't work out, let's say he is not my type ... ..  
... .. "Oh my God, it is eight months since I called you. I am so so soooo sorry, Pinni. You know how things are here. I just finished the required courses, need to submit a PQ pretty soon.

... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..

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In course of time, the gaps between calls became longer and longer. A couple of times, I tried to point it out, even teased her, "What, you've forgotten me? Or, I am also one of those dumpees?"

"Oh, no, I will never do that to you. It's just ... just got so busy. I didn't stop calling you suddenly. I thought I was doing it in a matter of fact way."

"Well, probably it is in a matter of fact way. Okay, I know you do have work. After all, you've come to this country for studies, not for my entertainment, ha, ha."

"You know I do care about you, care a lot."

"Yes, okay, get to work. We can talk later. I am not going anywhere."

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I sit on the shore under a tree watching the ducklings floating in the river. A little away, a father is teaching how to catch fish to his little daughter, probably nine. It amuses me. For some reason, I thought fishing is only man's sport. Come to think of it, I never considered fishing a sport. After all, what do you do? Let the line into the water and wait until some stupid fish takes the bait. Well, maybe that is not all there is to it. Some day I have to talk to one of those sportsmen and find out. I am glad that father is teaching his daughter though. There seems to be some kind of social justice in that.



The water seems to have risen to a new level. That's what I like about this river. If it is a lake, the water level rises only when it rains right here. But in the case of the river, it might rain one hundred miles away, and the water level rises here. On top of it, all the foam cups and the trash people throw into the river gets washed away to another shore. ... Hum, people! I can't believe how can they be so indifferent or even stupid. Last week I saw a sofa floating around in the water. For a couple of days, only its top edge showed at a distance, and to me, it looked like a dead body wrapped in a white sheet and tied to a plank. It is only after it got closer to my place, I could see that it was the back of a sofa. ...

I squint and try to peek through into the bottom of the river, into its heart. What might she say, if she had only voice? Would she be complaining about the garbage people throw into its crystal clear water?

"Why do you worry about the people that come and go into your life?"

I twitch and look around. Who spoke? Whose voice I just heard?

"That is me, I am talking to you," the words reverberate from the bottom of the river or so it seems, "I know it bothers you that people who vowed eternal friendship to you left you and moved on. Well, that's life. Nothing stays forever. You are just one piece in their lives, a piece on the chess board; you've played your role and that is all there is to it. Remember the royalty of olden days? The *ishtasakhi* (bosom friend) of the princess, or in modern times the fifth grade teacher--we have any number of examples. They all have roles to play, willy-nilly. In the olden days, the bosom friend was arranged by the king for his daughter. Now, things just fall in place--neighbors, colleagues at work, distant relatives happen to move to the place you are living in. ... Most of the time you play the role of a fifth-grade teacher, I suppose. For a young boy, that is the first time, he is exposed to the world and the teacher appears to be the most know-all of all the the people he had known in his short lifespan. Eventually, he gets to know other teachers, makes other friends and his fifth grade teacher is left behind as 'just one person' he had known in the past. That is human nature. Look at all these dead leaves, broken branches floating away to far-off land in the river. You see these ducks, cranes and the turtles? Do you think they are the same you've seen yesterday? No, they are new arrivals, came today. They'll be here for a few days and soon go on to find a new place. Look at that man, sitting on the shore with the fishing pole in the water. This is his first day here. Of course, he is not the first for me. You can't even imagine how many people sat on that shore and poured their hearts out ... He may not even remember this place and this water tomorrow, not even the fish he might catch and have it for supper tonight. Another day, another person sits there with pretty much the same routine. That is the way of life, way of the world!"

I remember all the young men and women who have contacted me as soon as they arrived here and then weaned away slowly. It is interesting, it is seasonal!

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"Ah, what an amazing ... uh oh, I am sorry, so so sorry, did I disturb you? Really, really, I am sorry. You are lost in your own thoughts, I believe. Or, maybe meditating?"

I turn around and see a young man, settling down next to me. I smile and assure him, no I am not lost, not meditating, it is okay for him to sit down.

"It's okay? You mean it? I think you're saying just to please me. That's in your upbringing, I guess. You say it's okay; another person would have yelled at me, called me stupid or something,

and told me to leave her alone ... You know we foreigners are often considered loutish. ... Oh, yeah, been through all kinds of experiences. Anyway, what is that in your hand? I stopped because of that book only. Looks like a Telugu book. Who's the author?"

"G.V. Krishna Rao."

"Never heard of him. Probably new, an upstart ... like Shakespeare ... ha, ha. ..."

"Oh, no, he is from previous generation, well, previous for me; for you, maybe two generations."

"Two generations! Wow. Well, there is a lot I to learn, I suppose, might as well start right now, right here. Tell me all about him. What does he write about? Now, I am beginning to feel like a fifth grader!"

I remember my daughter saying, "Mom, friendship may happen for a - reason, season or lifetime."

I give him a sidelong glance. What is he: *Friend for a reason, season, or lifetime?* What is he going to be?!

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## 10. THE IMAGE IN HER MIND

“Viswapriya’s speech today,” 14-year-old Uma tiptoes into the room with the same humility as Nara [Arjuna] would have approached the Lord Narayana in the great epic, Mahabharata.

Badari, with his head buried in his homework, says, “What?” without looking up.

Uma repeats the same lines and adds, “I told you about it yesterday too.”

She is a year younger but two classes behind. He is studying first year Intermediate and she is still in the tenth class. Because of his short stature, he often gets compliments for being so advanced in his studies. He knows that his sister also gets similar compliments yet he is a man and she is a woman. He never forgets that. The reason being occasions like this. Mother does not allow Uma to go out alone in the evenings. He has to accompany her.

She says, “I told you about the meeting in the town hall. They are celebrating Gurujada Appa Rao centenary.”

“So?”

“Amma told me to ask you to go with me,” she says.

Badari is quiet. For a second he is annoyed that amma should assign the bodyguard duties to him constantly.

Viswapriya is one of the most popular writers of our times. Telugu readers are crazy about her stories, they can relate to the characters in her stories and the events she illustrates. Viswapriya is plain and unpretentious in her writings. She has never published her picture, and almost never appeared in public but for a few rare occasions like today's event. Whenever she travels, she is accompanied by her husband or a close friend but never alone. In her stories, she never talks big.

Uma is a huge fan of Viswapriya. She has a box full of newspaper clippings and tear-sheets from magazines—every story and every article the writer has ever written and every piece of news the newspapers have reported. Telugu readers adore her the same way they adore the famous movie stars like Savitri or Jamuna. In fact, several women writers are enjoying the same status nowadays.

“I can’t go now. I have lot of homework,” Badari says.

Uma cannot argue with her brother. Disappointed, she brings her box full of memorabilia and sits down. She may be young in age nonetheless smart, very smart. She can pick a good story from a handful of badly written stories; not only that, she can even spot the finer qualities in a story. She is impressed by Viswapriya’s progressive views and the manner in which she presents them. Viswapriya’s pen excels in depicting sensitive views and delicate thoughts in everyday language, without resorting to highbrow rhetoric.

Uma picks a story, “Habits,” and starts reading for the nth time.

The narrative depicts a young man who went to Chicago for a year, married a Telugu woman, who was born and raised in Chicago. They return home and the mother welcomes them into her

home wholeheartedly. However, she realizes soon enough that there is an inexplicable cloud shrouding room. There is no change in the attitude of her son but there is a marked difference in his habits. He sleeps in late, eats breakfast before brushing teeth, and drinks coffee ten times a day. The daughter-in-law puts too much salt in everything and insists that her husband cannot eat spicy foods. Much to the chagrin of the mother, the daughter-in-law maintains that her husband has gotten used to eating at the table; he cannot sit on the floor. Mother is hurt. "How could her son ditch his habits of twenty-five years in just one year? And how is it possible that the habits he has acquired in one year became permanent?" mother reflects painfully.

Each time Uma reads it, tears fill her eyes. The author does not blame any one character; she presents the three angles skillfully. Society is a river which runs against each individual. Caught thus in the opposing current, each individual will have to lose a part of him or her, necessarily.

Badari glances at her sidelong and, after a while, agrees graciously to accompany her to the meeting. It is almost time for them to leave. They tell their mother and proceed to the meeting.

On the way to the meeting, Uma tries to imagine how Viswapriya looks: Possibly she is 30 or 35, and tall; has a pleasant expression, beautiful eyes like lotus petals, shapely nose, sharp and pointed chin; she is wearing 150-count handloom sari, peacock-colored with two-inch gold-threaded border, and a matching blouse. That is the image Uma has in her mind.

She also plans to obtain Viswapriya's autograph. Autographs are funny. Some people scribble their names, some dash off a wavy line but very few write beautiful messages. Uma hopes she will get a nice message. Then she remembers something. Long time ago, she wrote to Viswapriya telling how much she had enjoyed her stories but never received a response.

"If she keeps replying to all the letters she has received, she will never have time to write the stories you are crazy about," Badari teased her.

"Ha!" Uma stuck out her tongue at him but understood his point nevertheless. There may be some truth in his words, she admits.

They reach the town hall. First ten rows on the left are marked for women. Uma takes a seat in the second row. She does not want to miss the view, but does not want to sit in the first row either. The second row seems to be perfect. Badari makes a mental note of her position and goes to the back row, not too far from her.

The meeting starts on time. Probably the organizers thought that it in itself would be a special attraction for the day. The chairman begins with opening remarks. There is one woman on the stage, and that woman is not looking anywhere near the image Uma has imagined in her mind, not even close. The woman on the stage is heavy set, short; her face is a full circle like a new moon. She is wearing a cheap nylon sari and the same colored blouse. "Well, it is not her fault that I imagined differently," Uma consoles herself reluctantly. She tells herself that looks do not matter, what is important is the words Viswapriya writes.

The chairman finishes his speech and moves on to introduce the writer, "Srimati Viswapriya needs no introduction. You all know her only too well. She is the greatest writer of our times. She has been writing for over fifteen years. She is second to none. Very few possess the level of creative skills she has shown and we are blessed to have her in our midst today. She has written several long poems, hundreds of short stories and one and a half dozen novels. There is no need for me to say anymore. Here she is, brothers and sisters, the unparalleled writer, Viswapriya garu."

Uma looks around. Just like her, the entire audience is waiting anxiously for the writer's speech.

Viswapriya gets up from her chair and approaches the mike. The operator hops on to the stage and lowers the mike.

The second-to-none writer clears her throat, looks around and starts her speech, "Before I start my speech, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the organizers who are kind to invite me to participate in this extraordinary event. To be frank, I was not sure I would be here today. I was not planning on attending this meeting. There are several reasons for that. For one thing, it is ridiculous for me to go on the same stage as Satyanarayana garu, one of the greatest scholars and orators of our time. I even mentioned this to the secretary. He would not listen. Maybe because of his respect for me or my writings, he insisted on my acceptance. So here I am.

"This town is *the* place for numerous renowned writers, to speak the truth. To me it is heartening that you all have decided to celebrate Gurujada Appa Rao centenary. I am flattered that I was invited to participate in these celebrations. This is an unusual gift to me. Let me explain why. Ten years back ..."

Uma is fidgety. She looks around. The rest of the crowd also appears to be confused. The enthusiasm in the audience begins to fizzle away. The anxiously-awaited speech of Viswapriya is slipping.

Badari feels an uncanny satisfaction in this turn of events. He glares at Uma. His looks seem to say, "Enough, let's go". Uma signals back, "Wait."

"Speaking of a great man like Appa Rao garu in three words is like narrating Ramayana in three words—*katte, kotte, teche*, [bound, beat and brought], proverbially. I am not that bold. Also, Satyanarayana garu has already said all that needs to be said, and he did it in an enchanting, inspiring language. In the eyes of Appa Rao garu, woman is a remarkable force. ..."

Somebody pulls Uma's braid from behind. Uma turns around. The woman behind her points towards the door. Badari is standing at the door, shaking his head vigorously, "Out, now!" Uma remains seated for another fifteen minutes, ignoring all the signals from Badari. The speech is stretching like elastic, no sign of substance. She gets up, disappointed.

"It is so stupid," Badari says, on the way, "I told you, she did not write those stories."

"Hum," Uma sighs. She is in no mood for chitchat.

By the time they returned home, it is quarter to seven.

Father and Murthy *Mamayya* are on the porch, chatting. Mamayya came from Guntur for a brief visit.

"You kids, remember me? I think it is four years since we've seen each other. How was the meeting?" he asks them casually.

Uma goes up to his chair and asks shyly, "When did you come?"

Badari is standing by the pillar, smiling.

Amma calls out from the kitchen, "Chitchat later. Supper is ready. Come in, eat first. You can chatter all night."

Uma goes in, changes and goes into the kitchen. She sets the plates and sitting planks<sup>4</sup> quietly.

Father and Mamayya resume their favorite topic - politics. Badari goes to his room, changes into casual wear and returns to the kitchen.

While eating, Mamayya asks Badari, “So, what was that meeting about?”

“Some literary meet. You tell him,” Badari replies, eyeing his little sister. He is anxious to let Mamayya know that he is not that stupid; he will never attend such mediocre meetings. As far as he is concerned, he has seen them all; such soapbox speakers are dime a dozen, only if they can find the audience! However, he does not speak aloud since his father is right next to him.

Uma is feeling down as is; no need for this jab from this big brother. Nevertheless, she wants to answer the question since Mamayya asked. He is her favorite uncle, a Pandava prince in her eyes.

She says, feeling dejected, “Gurujada Appa Rao commemoration celebrations, Mamayya”. Her eyes are glued to the rice on her plate.

“Who are the invitees?” Mamayya is keen on pursuing the topic.

“Satyanarayana garu and Viswapriya garu,” Uma says. She is not enjoying this conversation.

“Satyanarayana garu must have given a very good speech,” Mamayya says.

“Yes, he is a great speaker. It was fascinating.”

“Ask her about Viswapriya,” Badari says teasingly. Immediately he also feels a bit of pity in the remotest corner of his heart. He softens his tone as he continues, “She hoped to hear an extraordinary speech from that lady writer.”

Mamayya cuts in quickly and says in Telugu, “Oh, yes, I know. She is no good at speeches,” and repeats the same in English, “She is not a good speaker.”

Badari casts an “I told you so” look at Uma. He is so proud of himself for being so knowledgeable. “I know that, Mamayya! I am sure she is not writing those stories at all. I think her father or brother writes them publishes in her name,” he says assertively.

Uma glares at him for a second and lowers her head again; she hates such opinions.

Mamayya comes to her rescue. “That is not fair, Badari. Some people are good speakers and some are good writers. Where is the rule that every good writer must be a great speaker too?”

“Well, in that case, I would have to say that she did not come prepared and that is not good either. Why did she not write her speech in advance and memorize it?” Badari retorts.

“Memorized speech will sound like a memorized speech still; it shows. I know her since she was a little girl. In fact, we two came here by the same train. I even invited her to our home. She may visit us sometime tomorrow.”

The ball of rice in Uma’s hand drops into her plate. Each word Mamayya spoke hits her ears like the early summer showers.

“Are you saying you know her that well?” she asks.

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<sup>4</sup> Rectangular wood planks, about two inches high, generally used at the dinner time to sit on.

“She worships Viswapriya,” father says with a little smile.

“I can’t say ‘very well’. She knows who I am and I know who she is. Like I said, we traveled together. We were chatting and it came up casually,” Mamayya clarifies his position.

Uma is silent for a while. She wants to ask so many questions but not sure which ones she can ask and which ones she can not or should not.

“So, you both live in the same neighborhood?”

“Yes, in a way.” And he turns to father and says, “You remember Chalapati, our classmate in M.A.?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Viswapriya is his niece. Besides writing, she is also Women’s Welfare Officer in our town. Trust me, she is very brave, a real free spirit in every sense of the term. I never saw another woman like her in my life. She jumps on a jeep like Rani Rudrama on a horse and goes around as she pleases. Just a few months back she was caught up in a litigation, escaped without a scar though. The rumor is she bought silk saris with a government grant meant for sewing machines for poor women. She argued that she sold her land and bought the saris and the purchase had nothing to do with the grant. God only knows the truth.” Mamayya stops and takes a sip of water.

Mother sees Uma is losing her appetite with all this chat. She says to her, “You are not eating. Here, have some curry.”

Uma shakes her head, “No.”

Father does not like discussing scandals in front of children. He says, “Yes, Murthy, you forgot to eat with all your talk. Come on, have some rice and curry.”

“Oh, no. I am eating fine,” Mamayya replies.

“I don’t feel like eating anymore,” Uma gets up and leaves the room. Mamayya notices it and is puzzled for a moment.

“She is always like that, too sensitive. Last week she went to a movie and did not eat for the next three days,” father says, apologizing on her behalf.

Mamayya nods, and finishes eating quietly. After they are done, father and Mamayya go on to the terrace where they start a serious debate on the China-Russia affairs.

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Badari sits down with his books but is not in a mood to study. Earlier at the supper, he was happy for a few minutes that his little sister’s fairy tale had crumbled. Later however he started feeling bad for her. He does not want her to be hurt that bad.

Uma is lying on her bed with a blanket pulled all the way up to her eyeballs. “It is not even nine yet. Why don’t you study for a while?” Badari asks her. He wishes he was not so hard on her.

“I am sleepy,” Uma rolls over towards the wall, and closes her eyes tight, trying hard to fall asleep.

In fact, she could not get sleep the entire night. She remembers an incident from long time back. A few years back Badari broke her most favorite doll. It hurt then and now the hurt is as bad.

She wonders. Is it possible that the story Mamayya told is a fabrication? But then, why would Mamayya lie? No. Maybe he did not know all the facts. He said he had heard it from somebody else. What if that somebody made up the story out of some innate grudge? Badari broke her doll; Mamayya shattered the image in her mind; he ruined her supper that evening and her sleep that night.

Uma wakes up late in the morning. It is past seven. Amma notices her red eyes and worries, “She is so naïve! How on earth is she going to live in this world?”

Uma pretends like nothing happened. She quickly finishes bath and sits down with her books. She wants to talk to Mamayya when nobody else is around. Finally, she gets a chance after father has left on some errand, Amma is busy in the kitchen and Badari left to see his friend. Uma approaches Mamayya.

“So, Mamayya, is it true that Viswapriya is involved in the Free Love Society in Madras?” That is the question that has been consuming her for some time. Since Mamayya says he knows her, maybe he can clear her doubt.

Mamayya is taken by surprise. Evidently, he has not expected Uma to know about this piece of information.

“I’m not sure. People talk all kinds of things you know. Rumors spread like mushrooms.”

Uma is not satisfied with his answer. Mamayya folds the paper he is reading, puts it down and says, “Come here.”

Uma pulls up a chair and sits next to him like an obedient student ready to learn.

“Let’s say everything I said is true. So what?” he asks her, with a puzzling smile.

Uma is mystified. She stares at him, trying to figure out his thoughts.

Mamayya takes a few minutes to say what he is going to say. “Uma, writer or not, people are complex creatures. You have formed an opinion of Viswapriya based on her writings. You cannot expect her to live up to your idea of her personality.”

“How come? Is she pretending?”

“Well, what I am saying is writers create characters as they saw in the world around them. The characters they depict in their writings are not themselves, not necessarily anyway.”

“Does that mean they are dishonest?”

“Oh no. That is not what I am saying. This is hard to explain. Let me put it this way—they depict characters, some at least, in a manner they would like them to be. Even when their personal lives are screwed up, they want to be remembered as elite. That may happen consciously or unconsciously for all I could see.”

Uma is still confused. It still comes to the same. Writers are dishonest or so it seems.

“All right. I will ask you another question. Let us say you have a friend. She has a distant relative. She tells you that he is like a brother to her. And then you hear a few things about her from others—things like she is romantically involved with this so-called brother. You confront her and she of course denies it vehemently. Eventually she marries him. What do you think your conclusion would be under the circumstances?”



“That she lied to me. I would be angry.”

“Yes, at first,” Mamayya waves his index finger and says, “and then, if you really like her very much, you will try to justify her actions. You will say she did not tell you the truth *because* she respected you so much, and because she wanted you to cherish the impression you have of her. Is it not true?”

“Maybe.”

“That means you interpret her so-called lies as her respect for you.”

“I suppose.”

“And why is that?”

Uma has no answer.

“I will tell you why.”

She nods, still puzzled. To speak the truth, she has no clue where he is heading?

“It is all in your head. You have invoked an image of her in your head. And you have come to believe that *that is her true personality*. After that, each one of your beliefs about her is based on the first image. That first image could have resulted from any number of sources. Your idea of her personality is a collaborative composition so to speak.”

He stops and looks straight into Uma’s face. She smiles vaguely. He is elated for putting a smile on her lips.

“I am telling you. The moment you start believing a perception, even when it is thin as onion skin, it turns into a steel fence fairly quickly and it narrows your perspective. After that, you lose the ability to hear the opinions of others and make sense of them. Let us take your case for instance. Why did you develop such an unusual interest in Viswapriya? Because the ideas expressed in her stories appealed to you at a personal level. Based on her writings, you conjured up an image of her in your mind: She is beautiful because she described a beautiful girl in one of her stories. She deserves to be worshipped because she created a character worthy of worship in another of her stories. So also all the great qualities you admire. In fact, what you did is not very different from what she did. She wrote in her stories about the qualities she appreciated and you rewrote them in your mind. Forget all that. Just learn to appreciate them only in fiction and be happy. You can not expect a branch to carry the same fragrance as the flower.”

Uma feels like she has understood his words vaguely though. Something is beginning to clear up, and that is comforting.

Mamayya continues, “It is like the movie stars, Savitri or Jamuna you know. You form an opinion of them based on the characters they play in the movies. But in your heart of hearts, you do know the actor and the character are not the same.”

“I see what you mean,” Uma says. Then there is one more question. “What about what Badari has said? That her brother or father might be writing and publishing in her name? Do you know anything about that?” she asks.

“Personally, I don’t think so. In the past, in the thirties and forties, some men wrote and published in the names of their sisters and wives. They did so in order to encourage women to write. Now, in the fifties, that has changed. Now women are writing about things men did not

write or wrote only from their own perspective. Women are writing what they are seeing and feeling. It is almost like a new genre, and refreshing too. In my opinion, you are enjoying her stories because you share her views. Just leave it at that and you will be one happy reader.”

“All right,” Uma says and returns to her memory box.

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(The Telugu original, *nammakam* [trust], was published in *sahiti* monthly in the mid-sixties.)

## 11. FROSTBITE

I was on the terrace watching the clouds which were roaming freely westward--jet black clouds like big black boulders or water buffaloes. It is awesome, like *vaprakreedaaparinathagajaprekshaneeyaa*<sup>5</sup>, as the poet Kalidasa had put it. The Sun like a mischievous child was spreading his rays from behind the clouds. Possibly, the lord Krishna, shining in his divine glory had the same brightness,... childlike Radha, standing on the ground and looking up, unable to reach such heights, was probably asking sadly, "How come you found me only me for your divine pranks?"...

The woman, my imaginary Radha, standing between me and the chain of clouds—on the terrace across from me—moved slowly and vanished into the background. Her gait was like that of a stately princess, conscious and graceful.

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As far as I know, there is only one old lady living in that house, located back to back with ours. She owns it. The only evidence that the two houses were owned by the same person some three generations back, is the parapet wall, three-feet high, separating the two terraces. If one wants to reach the main entrance using the main streets, one has to walk hundred yards and turn round two corners.

I said to amma at dinner, "I saw somebody in that house, the one behind us..."

"Yes. He is that old lady's grandson or something. He married her granddaughter on the 10<sup>th</sup> last month. The bride is a doll. What's the point? She is hit with some unknown disease, it seems; not talking, not eating. She is used to jump around like a dancing horse and now turned into a cadaver. Her family members are crying their hearts out." I watched Amma amusingly as she explained with her hand gestures and expressions in tune with her words like a seasoned dancer. However, even more surprising to me was the girl who wouldn't utter a single word; stopped talking one week after the ceremony.

Her silence is more confusing to me than the question how amma had collected this much information about them in such a short time.

"May be she is mute!" I said.

"Uh, you and your brains..."

I looked at amma. Why not?

"It seems she sang an *ashtapadi*<sup>6</sup> when the groom's party went to see her.<sup>7</sup> And they were just enthralled by her music. Actually, that was the main reason for the groom to accept the proposal."

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<sup>5</sup> A phrase from Kalidasa's *Meghasandesam*, comparing the clouds to the scene of an excited, playful elephant.

<sup>6</sup> *Ashtapadi* are light classical music. The lyrics are written by Jayadeva in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, known as "Geetagoavinda kavyam" are very popular in Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>7</sup> Traditional first step in arranged marriages. The groom and his parents visit the bride at her place.

“Ha! Whatever that song could be?” I asked, laughing.

“*Dheera sameere...*”<sup>8</sup>

I was dumbstruck. I know one girl who could sing that particular song with such enchanting voice. That was Vakula, my classmate in third grade in my school days in Guntur. Marrying Vakula after listening to her music is no a big news, no favor. Even snakes would dance to her music. I remember the time when she had taken a part in a school play. It was *Khadga Tikkana*.<sup>9</sup> Vakula played the role of a messenger. It was a one-minute appearance on the stage, yet she made a permanent mark in the hearts of the audience with her sweet voice. Her role in the scene was to announce that Thikkana died in the battlefield and Chanamma(his wife) will be credited with the title *veerapatni* [a great warrior’s wife] as long as the moon and stars shine in the sky. When Vakula finished reciting her verse, the audience were awestruck by her voice and clamored ‘once more,’ poor Chanamma hadn’t had a chance to say even so much as “Oh!” Obviously, it is that Vakula I saw on the terrace earlier in the evening.

After our school had closed for summer, I was bored and came here to spend my vacation. There was not much to do here either. Now I was glad that I found a friend after my heart. Then it occurred to me suddenly—do not know whether she had lost her mind or heart or had been afflicted with some unknown disease. How could I expect her to talk to me, when she was not talking to her husband, not even to her parents? Why would she consider me dearer to her than her own people? Furthermore, our relationship was a thing of the past, it was so long ago!

I showed my irritation on amma, “this place is a jungle, no humans, not even to pick up a fight, let alone chatting. I told you I don’t want to come here. You did not listen.”

I did not see Vakula again in the daytime. She however came up on to the terrace just about the same time as yesterday, in the evening. The sky was cloudy. I was with amma helping her to pick up the mango pickles put out in the sun to dry<sup>10</sup>. Amma came to the terrace to bring them back into room in case it might rain at night.

I was about to call Vakula when a man, short and dark-complexioned, showed up. He said to her, “Nobody’s home. I am going out.” Vakula glanced at him briefly and turned away.

“Did you hear?” he said again. Vakula did not even look at him this time.

“*Cha*. What kind of a person! *useless for the mother-in-law, unnecessary burden for the daughter-in-law*”<sup>11</sup>, he left, murmuring.

Quite a charmer!! I couldn’t help wondering.

Vakula and I had a unique bond in our childhood days. We never played together. Can't even say, as the saying goes, *we ate off of the same plate and slept in the same bed*<sup>12</sup>. But if Vakula felt bad about something, she would just come and sit next to me. Further, we never felt a void

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<sup>8</sup> One of the Ashtapadi mentioned above in footnote 1.

<sup>9</sup> Khadga Tikkana is a famous war hero in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. According to the legend, Tikkana, came to be known as Khadga [sword] Tikkana, went to war and returned home fearing death. His wife Chanamma challenges his manhood. Thus provoked, Tikkana returns to the battlefield and dies a heroic death. Customarily, the wife of a hero earns the eternal reputation as *veerapatni*, literally hero’s wife.

<sup>10</sup> In the coastal area, Andhra Pradesh, mango pickles are dried in the sun in summer time, for safekeeping year round.

<sup>11</sup> *Aththa ki choopu chetu, kodaliki mopu chetunu!*, a usage emphasizing she is useless and worth less!!

<sup>12</sup> Popular Telugu usage *oka kanchamlo tini oka manchamlo padukunevaaLLam* implies close friendship.

even when we had nothing to talk about, no problems, and no solutions. Vakula was so sensitive, she could feel others' pain as her own ... and now, living a life so scornful that somebody could say *cha*? I could not believe it. Something big must have happened. The question is what is that big thing? I have no illusions that she would tell me her problem, the problem she would not discuss with her own mother. But to me, a writer of one or two stories, the reason for Vakula's silence is like a puzzle without clue. I thought it through all night yet could not figure it out.

Next morning, I finished bathing and went on to the terrace with amma again. Vakula was hanging wet clothes to dry on their terrace. I mustered courage and called her. She looked up, startled, saw me for a second and went away.

"Ha!! You thought you are better than us?!!" said amma, referring to Vakula's indifference to me.

"Whatever could be bothering her?" I said, talking to myself.

"What botheration?! Playing games, if you ask me!!" said amma.

I was taken aback. She was so concerned about Vakula until two days back, and now was so harsh?! What crime Vakula had committed within these two days?

Here is the story I finally got to learn from amma: On the previous evening, Vakula's mother-in-law had gone to neighbor's house to play a board game, and her husband Narahari had gone out after informing Vakula. I knew that. I had been there, seen him leaving. During that time, a passerby seized the opportunity, and walked away with the radio in the living room and a saree that was neatly pressed and ironed and sitting on a chair in the livingroom.

Vakula was sitting on the cot in the porch and watched him from the moment he entered the house to the minute he walked away with the radio and the saree. She sat there with the calmness that could put even Paramanandayya's pupil<sup>13</sup> to shame.

"Really? Incredible!!" I said, laughing.

"Is that a laughing matter for you? Aarani saree worth 150 rupees at the least," said amma, as if that was her own saree.

Why shouldn't I laugh? After all, the owner of the saree herself sat there and watched while it was being stolen? Amma says we should not laugh at the people who slip and fall. I would laugh even if it was my own saree under the circumstances.

"Coffee colored saree with orange border. They said it was so beautiful," said amma again.

I was shocked.

"Vakula saw that saree after they had finished the wedding purchases and insisted on buying it."

I lapsed into a reverie. A wise man once stated that most of the squabbles in marriages arise from the fact that, *women are not as crazy about their husbands as they are about sarees*. This time I couldn't laugh at amma's words. The fact that Vakula lost "the saree she loved so much" without blinking an eye got my attention. I had known her love of sari with orange colored border.

Every evening, we were going on to our terraces at the same time. After three days, she looked at me for a second. I smiled as I saw a trace of recognition on her face. She turned around

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<sup>13</sup> A folklore. Paramanandayya was supposedly a teacher who had pupils that were classic examples of stupidity.

immediately and went away. I came down and lay down on the cot. My short nap was disturbed by the conversation in the next room. The voice was familiar. That was Vakula's mother, Varalakshamma garu.

"Oh! Kalyani!! You have grown up, really!!" she said as she saw me. She came, after learning about the stolen saree. Even she could not understand Vakula's state of mind.

Vakula was being shown to a different doctor each day—having x-rays taken, consulting specialists, on and on. What could any doctor do when the patient herself would not tell what her problem was? Even the God does not grant wishes without asking. Her mother made a vow to offer *niluvu dopidi*<sup>14</sup> to the lord Venkateswara.

They even took her to a mental hospital, suspecting she might be mentally ill. The doctor suggested to keep her in the clinic for two days for observation. Vakula's husband, Narahari agreed and signed up for a room in the special ward. Vakula did not break her silence. In fact she showed no signs of any other problem but for keeping silent. The doctor completed all the tests and said, "Whoever has called her crazy must be crazy, if you ask me. She is deeply disturbed by something. Find out what she really is looking for!!"

"*You* must be crazy to say that. If she is suffering only from some unfulfilled desire, why wouldn't she say so? Why would she come to every doctor we are taking to?" said Vakula's mother, Varalakshamma garu.

The doctor laughed and said, "I will put it in writing, if you will. She has no medical problem. Even if you take her to England, you will get the same diagnosis. Probably she didn't like this marriage."

Varalakshamma garu returned home with Vakula.

Vakula had not danced with joy at the time of fixing this marriage but she had not shown any signs of disagreement or displeasure either. There was no indication that she was not happy with this marriage. Vakula was brought up by her grandmother--which rules out things like falling in love and/or hollering freedom of choice and such. ... Furthermore, she took to silence after three days after her wedding!

Vakula was attending to all the household chores without any complaint or signs of unhappiness. She was managing her part very efficiently while her mother-in-law took care of the chores in the kitchen.

At last Narahari said, "What do you really want? You tell me and I will get it!"

Narahari took her to a psychologist. He asked million questions—about the environment she was raised in, about her parents' attitude, her hobbies, likes, dislikes ... Narahari answered him as much as he could, but not up to the satisfaction of the psychologist. Narahari also mentioned that Vakula was watching sunset everyday. The psychologist wanted to see her at that particular time. He came in the evening when both of us were standing on either side of the parapet wall.

I was about to turn around and leave, thinking it might be improper for me to stay. Vakula grabbed my hand and stopped me. I stood there sensing her thought in a strange way. I was not

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<sup>14</sup> A vow made to the God in exchange for granting the favor of good health to Vakula. The particular vow requires the family to present the Lord with one complete set of jewelry, head to toe, on behalf of the devotee [Vakula in this case].

sure whether she felt incapable of answering the endless questions of that doctor or did not want to answer them at all. Or, maybe, she wanted me to tell him to get lost—meaning he was there to destroy the only few pleasurable moments she was left with.

“Today, the sky is not beautiful,” he said. Vakula stared at him for a second, crossed over the short parapet wall and came into our house! In the next minute, I and that psychologist were standing there facing each other!

“How long since you have known her?” he asked me.

“Not long. When I was in the fourth form [ninth grade] she was in the third form [eighth grade],” I answered. He asked me to tell everything I knew about her. I turned around to see what she was doing. She was lying on my cot with her eyes shut.

“Well, you are the psychologist and you are asking me. I’ll tell you whatever I know. This could be just my imagination. As far as I know, Vakula is delicate like a flower, innocent like a child. So childlike, she honestly thinks that things like deception, jealousy, and ill-will exist only in the books and not in real life. When I think of her, there is a passage that comes to my mind. Probably you have read it too. That is, if a woman lost her mind, it means we have lost a great writer or a poet; if a woman is roaming around in the jungle collecting herbs, probably we have a great mind wasted.<sup>15</sup> That is what comes to my mind when I see Vakula,” I said.

“You might be right. But, please, try to find out the incident that has changed her into who she is now. It is just as natural for a human being to go into a shock as to come out of it. We can think of a remedy only after knowing the reason.”

I did not have the courage to go near Vakula even after he was gone. I was still standing there. I did not notice when she came back and stood behind me. She was looking at the beauty of the evening sun she loved so much. I felt guilty after seeing her face.

I felt sorry for her mother. It was like asking a woman to choose between a son with a short life-span or a daughter accursed with widowhood<sup>16</sup> - no win situation for any mother, and particularly a tough one for a mother who had the child in her late forties. Varalakshamma garu decided to take her daughter back to her village. She did not see any point in leaving Vakula in a marriage that apparently was not her choice. Poor soul, she was so desperate!!

I remembered the confidence with which Vakula stood beside me. How could I ask her what is her mystery? Further how can I reveal that to others? All the names associated with treason, starting from Vibheeshana<sup>17</sup> came to my mind. If I had done that, there would be no punishment for my treason. On the other hand, how many people would be happy if Vakula becomes normal again! In that case, wouldn’t that be okay? I couldn’t make up my mind—what is right, what is wrong?

Next morning, I finished my coffee and said to amma, “I am going to their home.”

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<sup>15</sup> Author vaguely remembers these lines being taken from “A Room of One’s Own,” by Virginia Woolf.

<sup>16</sup> The Telugu proverb *arthaayushkudaina koDuka, aidothanam leni koothura* is supposed to have been asked of a woman praying the Almighty Lord for a child.

<sup>17</sup> In the epic Ramayana, Vibheeshana was the brother of Ravana, the evil king. Vibheeshana was a devotee of Rama, and sold out his brother to Rama in the name of justice. Although his act was justified in the name of protecting the innocent, the act in itself is still heinous at one level.

“Not necessary,” she said. Then she told me that Vakula was suspected of being possessed. They called a psychic healer. He examined Vakula from head to toe, walked around her in a ritualistic fashion. “Dumb ghost,” he said. Had the family make a heap of five hundred rupees and drew a circle around it. Uttered some strange sounds. “Speak” he said. Vakula did not speak. He beat her with neem sticks, sprinkled turmeric and *kumkuma*<sup>18</sup> all over the house. “Talk,” he said. She did not talk. After he had left, they all noticed a red scar on Vakula’s hand, from wrist to the ring finger. They were astounded. ... God knows what the disease was or the extent of her suffering. All I could see was only the torture she was put through in the name of treatment.

“To hell with all these treatments? In all possibility, she might be hurting more from these treatments than from the real problem. Leave her alone for sometime. Things could resolve on their own,” I said.

“We are also thinking the same thing. Yesterday he started bashing us; said we cheated him and hooked a beast on to him. We are worried sick about our little darling’s life, a real gem. Our baby’s life is in shambles and we have to put up with his snide remarks too?! Whatever happens happens. We will take her back with us. Will send her back only after she gets better,” said Vakula’s mother.

Vakula is the luckiest if she does not understand what is happening around her, I told myself.

That evening I went to see Vakula since she would be going back the next day. I entered the house. Narahari came in right behind me.

“What can you do for her in that village of yours? Let me take her with me to my town. I have a friend, a specialist in this kind of things. Will show her to him,” he said.

He wanted to take Vakula, innocent like a child, with him to a place nine hundred miles away. Varalakshamma garu stared at him as if she could not believe what she had heard.

“Yes, I will take her with me, I will arrange for her treatment.”

Till that moment, Vakula was there as if it did not concern her. For the first time, she turned her head and looked at her husband. Her glance was like the blazing third eye of Siva—the eye that opened on *manmatha* [cupid] when he tried to disturb Siva’s *dhyana* [meditation]. It was the glance of the divine Cobra that bedecked Shiva’s neck, and that could look at Garuda [divine Eagle] in defiance. It was the glance of a woman who remained submissive and patient and took all the abuse of men for centuries and finally opened her eye and spoke. There was no ambiguity in her gaze. Narahari lowered his head, turned around and left.

It was hopelessly humid that night. I moved my cot on to the open terrace. Thoughts about Vakula crowded my head, I could not sleep. There was no doubt that she did not like this marriage. It was almost like challenging the laws of our times and customs. He might not be handsome as cupid, but she was not pressured in to this marriage. Why did not she speak up at that time?

The clock chimed two and I woke up to the sounds. I opened my eyes feeling that somebody was sitting on my cot.

Vakula!!!

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<sup>18</sup> Red powder used for the dot on the forehead by Hindus.



I sat up. Moon was showing in all his glory. Her eyes were sparkling in the moonlit night, like beautiful fish in water.

I wanted to speak something, assure her things would be okay. But in that tranquil night --- Vakula looked like a part of the nature, like Jada Bharata<sup>19</sup> in that still night. What can I tell her? I am not qualified to interpret the zodiac chart to the angels.

“Kalyani!...”

“Vakula!...” Vakula was speaking! My heart leapt to my throat. My head was spinning with hundred questions. Which one first? What next?...

Vakula quietly took my hand in to hers.

“Kalyani! He is impotent.”

The words, so helplessly uttered by Vakula sounded horrific in the thick of that dark night. There was nothing more to tell. There was no more mystery about her. She was like a tender flower crushed and thrown out, a frostbitten flower, wilted forever, with no chance of resurgence.

I did not know when she has gone. English news was being broadcast by the time I woke up. I was walking toward bathroom to brush my teeth.

“Vakula ...” amma said.

I was about to say “yes” and stopped, watching amma’s face.

Vakula was dead.

The family members gathered around her dead body in the porch and were crying in anguish. I sighed involuntarily. Vakula developed a severe stomach ache in the middle of the night and died on the way to the hospital. Vakula was freed from her suffering at last. Varalakshamma garu was wailing, heartrending sobs. It seems Vakula’s grandmother predicted her own death, and now her mother was thinking maybe Vakula also knew the time of her death. I could not stand there any more and watch them. I turned around to leave. Narahari stood at the gate, shedding crocodile tears. I wanted to slap him across his face with all the might.

Vakula’s life ended in that manner. Don’t ask me questions like--Why did Narahari marry? Why did he squander money on her like that? Maybe, there are people who could answer the question—those who lie just for fun, ruin the lives of others for no reason, donate two rupees and have their names of three generations engraved on the temple steps, .... and many more of the sorts!!

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(The Telugu original, *mancudebba* has been published in 1963 or 64 in *rachana* monthly magazine. Translated by Saipadma Murthy and Malathi Nidadavolu.)

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<sup>19</sup> Jada Bharata—a mythological character, known for his detachment. According to the legend, he was totally distanced from all worldly bonds. But at one time took pity on a baby deer that was hurt, took her in, nursed her and in the process became emotionally involved. For that reason he had to take one more life, to settle the debt. The story is usually told as an example to instill the value of detachment. In this context, the reference is to Vakula’s state of being unaware of the happenings around her.

## 12. ANGER

“How many times do I have to tell you,” Kantham screamed and slammed the phone.

She could barely contain herself; she was like an overripe tomato ready to burst. Normally Kantham was a gentle person. That is what everybody said about her. “You’re always smiling; don’t you ever get upset about anything?” they would say. The only time Kantham would flare up would be when she heard the voice of a telemarketer. She would snap and take the *narasimha*[i]avatar in a split second.

She tried to tell them in so many ways and in so many languages, yet they would not stop. They reminded her of *Bhatti Vikramarka*[ii] for all their determination to get a sale out of her. Therefore, she had gotten used to yelling at them; she was not embarrassed about her tone. She even had blurted out one or two expletives in English, Telugu, and Sanskrit, in a desperate attempt to stop them. After such explosion, she could not think straight, could not revert to whatever she was doing. That hurt her worse.

Kantham, with a low-paid job in a small Midwestern town, was a loner by choice. She preferred her own company to that of her colleagues at work and neighbors at home. That being the case, those phone calls were not appreciated.

During one of these exasperating days, she received a phone call from India. Her younger brother called to tell her that his daughter’s wedding had been arranged and Kantham was invited to the ceremony. Kantham was elated. She had not been home for over fifteen years. Now was a good time or so it seemed. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she could not help thinking that she would be free of those annoying phone calls for a while.

Thus the decision was made to go to India. She told her brother of the date of her arrival in Hyderabad. Her brother replied that he would not be able to receive her at the airport but he would send Mr. Jogibabu. Kantham wondered who this Jogibabu could be. As far as she could recall, there was no Jogibabu among her relatives. But then, it did not matter. All she cared was somebody would be there to receive her at the airport in Hyderabad.

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Kantham landed in Hyderabad. She collected her luggage and rushed to the custom’s desk. The middle-aged clerk at customs desk took his own sweet time to check her passport and let her move on. It was one o’clock by the time she had gone through the ritual and walked out of the airport. She identified Jogibabu easily. He had an imposing personality. He was wearing a white *dhoti*,[iii] a *zari kanduvaa* [iv] neatly folded and sitting cozily on his shoulder; and a dot on his forehead, which seemed to speak of his erudition. He stood out among all the others who wore ordinary shirts, pants, and *lungis*. [v] Jogibabu also recognized Kantham with equal ease. She might be a Telugu girl yet the signs of having lived in America for fifteen years were strikingly obvious. After identifying each other thus, they walked into the street.

Jogibabu was not much of a small talker. He seemed to be living in his own world. He gestured to Kantham to hand over the wheeled suitcase. Kantham said she could handle it but he ignored her meek protest and grabbed the handle.

In the next half hour, she noticed Jogibabu's demeanor to be somewhat foreign to her; probably, strange would be the word to describe him. He kept arguing with the driver about the route, the reason why he should not go one way or the other, and whether the driver understood his instructions. Kantham was not sure whether the driver cared for such interference with his job. After forty-five minutes, the auto-rickshaw stopped in front of a big building.

They entered the flat number 47 on the fourth floor. Kantham stood at the door and looked around. She noticed that the room was resonating with bits and pieces from America. Several questions beset Kantham: Who are these people? Why did Jogibabu bring her here? And when would she go to her brother's home in Guntur? However, she could not ask him, she was cowed into silence.

Jogibabu put her suitcase in the small room on the right, and returned to the living room after fifteen minutes or so. Kantham perched on the sofa apprehensively. Jogibabu told her about the family briefly. Vishnu vardhana Murthy, or "Bisu", went to America a decade ago for training in sales for a period of six months. Six years back he married Sarojini. She had not been to America but Bisu had given her a series of lectures on the American lifestyle. At his suggestion, she shortened her name to Ginni. The net result was they both mastered the "proper way of living". They filled their house with modern paraphernalia—from plastic forks to pop CDs, from Corningware to bed sheets from Target. Jogibabu finished his speech as he said, "I thought this would be comfortable for you. Bisu and Ginni are like family to me."

Kantham did not expect this. For some reason, it was a bit awkward for her.

At the end, he said, "Go, lie down," and nodded toward the small room where he had put her suitcase. Kantham went in, tiptoeing as if she was sleepwalking. She lay down but could not sleep. It was four. She kept rolling in the bed. At about six, she heard noises in the living room. Kantham got up and went into the living room.

Jogibabu poured hot water in the coffeemaker, turned to Kantham and showed her the bathroom. "I'll get a towel," he said. Kantham said she had brought her own towels.

Ginni woke up and called out for her son, "Hey, Bantu, come on, up, up ... getting late."

Kantham was startled by Ginni's tone. She did not understand why Ginni had to shout? Ginni went two more rounds before Bantu answered and he did it at the same pitch. In the next forty-five minutes, Jogibabu did the same. He was telling the boy pretty much in the same tone "Take a bath," "eat breakfast," "where is your bag?" Kantham thought the same instructions could work for the boy next door as well. She flinched at first and then told herself, she might as well get used to it. Amidst all that commotion, she had not gotten a chance to say hello to Ginni.

Jogibabu did not tell her why they had not gone straight to the train station, nor when they would go. Kantham was too scared to ask the question herself. Jogibabu went out after Ginni, Bantu and Bisu had left for their respective destinations and returned home a little before six. He started shouting again at somebody or other for some reason or other. Kantham had not heard one person in that house speak in normal tone; not one voice under 80 decibels.

Ginni returned home at six, went straight into the kitchen, made tea and served to Bisu and Kantham, and disappeared into her bedroom with her cup of tea. After twenty minutes or so, she shouted “Bantu” from the bedroom, came out and said in English, “This is the only time I can spend with my son.” She could be talking to a wall for all Kantham knew.

“Go with them,” Jogibabu said.

“To where?”

“To the park.”

Kantham was puzzled. Did he hear what Ginni had just said? Didn’t he understand? Or, did he choose not to understand? Besides, Ginni did not say, “come,” not even for the sake of propriety. Kantham did not want to explain all this to Jogibabu. She was quiet, made no effort to leave her chair.

“Didn’t you hear me, go with them,” he said again.

Kantham said she had a headache and went away into her room.

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In the next twenty-four hours, Kantham understood a few things about Jogibabu. He did not have a family of his own but Bisu and several other families in the neighborhood were treating him as part of their families. He had developed a peculiar relationship with them. They all addressed him by name followed by the respectful suffix *garu*, were seeking his advice in personal matters and listening to him when he spoke. He commanded respect around there, no doubt. Nevertheless, something bothered Kantham.

She could not figure out when they would be leaving for Guntur; even wondered if she would be in time for the wedding at all. After mulling over it in her head for a while, she decided to ask him.

“At time our train to Guntur leaves?”

“Trains ... um ... there are several,” he said, scrutinizing his notebook for something.

“We are taking which one?”

Suddenly there came another snap. “What’s your problem? You can leave right now if you want. Come on, I will take you to the station this minute,” he screamed.

Kantham felt mortified. “That’s not what I meant ...?” she mumbled. To her, it was clear that Ginni did not enjoy having Kantham in her home. What is not clear is whether Jogibabu understood it or not, or, maybe, he had understood but was pretending not to.

Kantham was getting frustrated by the minute. She remembered that her childhood friend Radha was living in Hyderabad. Her heart yearned to visit the friend and reminisce those days. What would be the best way to broach the subject with Jogibabu? At this point, even saying hello to him seemed to be a nerve-racking ritual. Finally she picked up the nerve to say, “My friend Radha is here.”

Jogibabu nodded. Kantham’s hopes to continue ended right there.

After an hour or so, “Where does she live?” he asked.

Kantham knew that Radha was in Banjara Hills but not the exact address. “I have their phone number,” she said meekly. Jogibabu dialed the number. It was no longer in service.

“What’s her husband’s name?”

“Subbarayudu.”

Jogibabu left without saying a word and returned after three hours. He said, “I tried to find their current phone number. There are twenty-five Subba Raos in the phonebook.”

“It is Subbarayudu, not Subba Rao.”

“How would I know unless you speak clearly?”

“I said Subbarayudu,” Kantham said softly.

“I am slow. You have to speak loud and clear. You do know Telugu, don’t you?”

Kantham was flabbergasted; she was lost for words. Where is this coming from? Who said anything about his intellectual faculties? ... Why did she bother talking to him?

Jogibabu did not leave it at that though. He found out the correct address and phone number of Radha and her husband Subbarayudu the next day. But within the past twenty-four hours, he questioned Kantham’s Telugu language skills eight times at least. She began to wonder about his language skills. He is the one, who was not listening to her or to anybody else for that matter.

Jogibabu dialed Subbarayudu’s number. Radha answered the phone on the sixth ring. She was elated to hear that Kantham was in town. She invited them, Kantham and Jogibabu, for lunch the next day. “Come early, about ten o’clock. We can chat and eat at leisure,” she said. Then she added, “My husband has to go to Malakpet, needs to leave at 1:30.”

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The next morning, Kantham woke up early and got ready by 7:30 a.m. Jogibabu changed leisurely; it was getting close to ten. Earlier in the morning, on her way to work, Ginni had given him some CDs and asked him to return them to her cousin, Chandram. “His house is on the way,” she said.

“Why didn’t you return them earlier,” he said, throwing the CDs into his bag.

Finally, they left home at about half past ten. Jogibabu found an auto rickshaw and told the driver to go to Malakpet first and then to Banjara Hills.

“Malakpet this way and Banjara Hills that way,” the auto driver said. He wanted twenty rupees over the meter charge. Jogibabu offered five.

For Kantham the entire haggling was ridiculous. She stood there, watching them as if she was watching a foreign film. At the end, Jogibabu told her to get in. It was already 10:45 and they were still just outside their own house. Radha had asked them to come at ten, and at 10:45, they still had places to go before they arrived at Radha’s! *Forget ten; can we be there by noon at least? What if Radha and her husband had left for their friend’s house by the time she arrived there?*

Chandram was very happy to see Jogibabu. “Haven’t seen you for how long, I can’t even remember, ohh, aahh, ...” He was even more excited to meet Kantham from the United States of America. He insisted that they should eat there.

“That would be a trouble for you,” Jogibabu said politely.

Kantham was surprised to hear him speak softly. “Besides, we are on our way to my friend’s house. She invited us for lunch,” Kantham said, encouraged by Jogibabu’s new gentle side.

“Oh no, no trouble at all. Actually, my wife had finished cooking. Eat a little and go, for my sake. I haven’t seen you in such a long time, it hurts me if you don’t eat here,” Chandram said.

Kantham was about to say something but Jogibabu shut her up with his usual remark. “Didn’t you hear what he said? He says the food is ready. Don’t you understand Telugu?”

Kantham wanted to shout that she could understand the language but not his attitude.

Chandram told them the food was ready but that was not the case in reality. His wife started rice and dal in the pressure cooker, and sat down to cut the eggplants. Jogibabu started narrating his autobiography to Kantham. She sat there pretending to be listening. She was not all that anxious to hear his story; she understood some parts and skipped others. In her heart of hearts, she was longing for the peaceful moment she would have with Radha.

While they were eating, Radha’s name came up. “You are heading toward Banjara Hills? My *pinni*—you remember my mother’s youngest sister—is living in the same area. I haven’t seen her in years, poor woman. Uncle died three months back. I haven’t seen her yet to offer my condolences.”

“Come, we are going that way,” Jogibabu said, invitingly.

Kantham’s spirits slipped two more notches down. She was not able to speak one word without Jogibabu crackling like fireworks. At their house, Chandram’s *pinni* invited them all into the house. After a while, Kantham and Jogibabu got up to leave. Chandram also got up. Kantham was confused but there was no use asking for details.

It was almost two by the time they arrived at Radha’s house. Radha was elated to see her childhood friend. Kantham was apologetic for their inordinate delay, “I am sorry. We messed up your plans for the day, I suppose.”

Radha dismissed it with a cluck of her tongue. “No mention. I am so glad to see you after so many years ... it is about twenty-five years? Right?”

“But you said Subbarayudu garu has to meet somebody.”

“Don’t worry. We always have plans and always break them,” Radha said reassuringly.

Subbarayudu, Chandram and Jogibabu sat in the living room and started discussing world politics. Kantham was dying to talk to Radha alone—their childhood days, the teachers, the mango grove behind the school building, their escapades during lunchtime ... but not amidst that kind of din. She was choked with the memories of old times. After an hour or so, Jogibabu stood up, saying, “Let’s go.” Kantham did not feel like she had spent time with her best friend at all.

Radha also felt the same way. “You just got here, leaving already? We were expecting you at noon. Stay for dinner. You can leave after eating supper,” she said. Kantham looked at Jogibabu, expecting another little flare-up.

Jogibabu cleared his throat, took a sip of water and continued his chat as if nothing happened. That was a big relief for Kantham. She heaved a sigh and followed Radha into the kitchen.

Radha set the table for five. she served food to the guests and her husband; she would eat after they had finished per custom. But Jogibabu suggested that she should sit down with them to eat. She pulled up a chair and sat between Subbarayudu and Kantham.

At the dinner table, Jogibabu made no exception; he had to have his own ways. While he was trying to scoop rice from the bowl, the ladle stuck to the rice and the bowl swirled. Subbarayudu grabbed the bowl to keep it steady.

“Leave it,” Jogibabu said abruptly. Kantham was surprised.

Subbarayudu tried to explain, “It is easy if the rice is hot. But when it is cold, it gets stuck.”

“Just leave it.”

Subbarayudu left the dish quickly; only Kantham noticed the expression on his face and felt bad for him. She was annoyed with Jogibabu. What is wrong if Subbarayudu held the dish? Why can’t he understand that there is nothing wrong if somebody offers a hand? She wanted to ask but decided not to.

After they had finished eating, she helped Radha to put away the dishes. In the kitchen, she could not help mentioning, “Jogibabu is short-tempered. I hope Subbarayudu garu did not take it to heart.”

Radha dismissed it with a chuckle.

“What? Didn’t you see the way Jogibabu garu talked to your husband? Or, you didn’t think it is odd?” Kantham asked again.

“You are thinking too much, maybe, because the American waters had gotten into your bloodstream. Obviously, you’ve forgotten our ways. We don’t take these little annoyances seriously. His temper is his and our tempers are ours—we all have them and learn to live with them.”

Kantham was confused. “You know him?” she asked.

“I don’t have to know *him specifically*. Take my *maava garu* [father-in-law] for instance. He came to live with us after he had retired, that was ten years back. He worked as headmaster and even now, we all look like ninth graders in his eyes. He is the teacher and we are the students. What can we do? That is the way some people are. He keeps telling us whatever he feels like, and we keep doing whatever we feel like. Holding the rice bowl is a very small matter. Whether my husband holds it or leaves it—it is all the same, not a big issue. You are worrying as if it is an international issue,” Radha said with a little laugh.

“You barely managed to get through each class in school. When did you get this smart,” Kantham said and then bit her tongue. She should not have said it.

Radha burst into a big laugh and said, “You can say it, I don’t mind. I’m not going to fuss about it. I’ve told you already. Here we don’t take anything seriously—big or small. We just say, so be it, and leave it. There, in your country, you say ‘take it easy’ yet worry about every little word and thing.” She narrowed her eyes mischievously.

Kantham’s eyes glowed like two magnolias. The early days of her youth sent sparks into her head; this friend Radha is from that time. A splash of jubilation erupted in their hearts.

About ten, Jogibabu got up to leave. They dropped Chandram at his place and reached home. It was eleven-thirty.

Ginni came into the living room with sleepy eyes and said, “I cooked for you two also. I thought you would be back for dinner.”

Kantham vanished into her room. She did not want to hear what Jogibabu would have to say. “I can never understand how they communicate and I don’t care”, she told herself.

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Eventually, Kantham arrived in Guntur and attended the wedding. She had a wonderful time with her brother and the family. On her way back to the States, she had plenty of time on the plane to ponder over the events in India. Radha’s words kept ringing in her head. She knew it had been like that in her early days. When did the things change, and when did she change? When did she come to take every little thing as an earth-shaking issue? What happened to her?

One thing about herself became very clear to her. She never raised her voice again, not even to the telemarketers. The one line that kept coming to her mind, when somebody upset her, was *maybe I am reading too much into it. Or, maybe, they do what they do because that is what they need to do. They are going to do so, no matter what I say to them ...*

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(April 2008)

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[i] One of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. In Narasimha avatar, he assumes the form of a half-lion and -half-human form to kill the demon king Hiranyakasipu.

[ii] A Children’s story in which Bhatti Vikramarka relentlessly answers the whimsical questions of a vampire relentlessly in order to accomplish his goal, which was to bring him the vampire to a yogi at his request. Vikramarka is a symbol of relentless pursuit and the vampire a symbol of asking enigmatic questions.

[iii] A five-yard, plain cloth men wear waist down.

[iv] A fine piece of cloth, with gold-threaded trim, men carry on shoulder.

[v] A three-yard, plain cloth men wear waist down. Unlike dhoti, lungi is not pleated.

(The Telugu original *kopam* has been published on [www.eemaata.com](http://www.eemaata.com). The English version has been published on [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net).)



### 13. LIFE AS A RITUAL

Sitapati took his wife Sita to the restaurant on their sixteenth anniversary per local custom.

Sita was watching the people around them. There are about 2 or 3 at each table - a young couple, an old man and his wife, a father and two children, another mother with six children, probably a birthday party. They all have paper hats on their heads and balloons in their hands. They are talking loudly- about movies, new videos, games, songs, music, about classes they liked or did not like, mortgages, credit card debts, the weather, the winter, the summer, South Africa, Nicaragua.

Sita looked at her husband. He was immersed in his own thoughts. What could that be, she wondered. It was sixteen years since they had been married. First two or three years it was fun. After that he was living his life and she was living hers...

"How are you today?" the waitress inquired with a pleasant smile. She told them her name and the house specials and asked if they were ready to order.

Sitapati told her that they were fine, and turned to Sita. "It is your anniversary. You should tell what do you want?" - one of his habits! He always talked as if he was doing everything for her sake. "Why? Am I the only one got married on this day?"

Sitapati laughed and asked the waitress for her suggestion. She recited the list again like the sacred mantra- specialty of the day, specialty of the house, her personal choice, and people's choice... Sitapati ordered specialty of the house for himself and Pina Colada for Sita.

"Would like grilled vegetable?"

"I have been ordering the same every time. I think I will have a salad today."

He slipped in to his own world again.

She kept looking around.

He remembered about their wedding anniversary four days back. "What do you want for your anniversary?" he asked her with great enthusiasm.

She understood that he would get her something whether she wanted it or not. After they came to this country this became a custom for them. She could not remember Indian festivals like Diwali and Pongal. But these local customs had taken over in their lives. Every year he would ask her and get something or other for her. She would keep up with him and buy something for him. They started with asking each other, protesting that he or she did not want anything, and then went out and buy something or other, wrap it in colorful wrapping paper, hide until the day came, send the children to neighbor's house and they go out to eat...Sita was not into these local ways all that much though.

Sitapati could never figure out what her likes and dislikes were. Not in the past 16 years he could figure out what she really wanted in life. He never forced her to do anything. He never forced anybody to do anything. It was just not in his nature.

He respected his wife very much. In fact he had great respect for all women. He had lot of friends. He was always there for them in their miseries. He was happy when they were happy. He thought highly of their brains. He had as much admiration for their wealth too, Sita thought.

That however was a moot point. Whenever somebody belittled women, he would take it up on himself to rescue the reputation of those women. No, he did not physically attack them but certainly would make sure that the men learned to respect women! Then some people teased him that his name was justified for that reason. Sitapati literally meant the husband of Sita. So you see. They had a point.

But then Sitapati did not take offense. He said he was proud to be Sita's husband. Had he figured out Sita's wishes, he would be able to get what she wanted. He would go to the end of the world if necessary, and bring it, give it to her, make her happy and feels great about himself. Unfortunately that was not happening.

Waitress brought plates and drinks. She arranged them neatly on the table and asked if they would like to have anything else.

"We are fine," Sitapati told her, and started nibbling chips.

Sita looked at him for a second and she too took a piece.

He lifted the glass and said, "To many happy years."

"Many happy years," Sita said.

"How is it?"

"Good," she said and saw couple at the table next to them. A middle-aged couple was sitting in the place of the young couple that was there before. Sita smiled.

"Why are you smiling?"

"I am looking at the couple next to us. Earlier there was a young couple. Now they are middle-aged. Feels like we are here for a generation long."

Sitapati kept quiet.

The couple at the next table is planning their vacation. The woman suggested that they should go to Florida. He preferred Colorado. Her argument was if they went to Florida they could visit with their children. His argument was they could spend time with their friends. Either of them thought his or her argument was the most reasonable one.

"We haven't seen our Telugu folks for a while," Sita said.

"Yeah?"

"How about inviting them next week."

"I might not be in town."

"...."

"That's okay. They all are your friends, anyways. Go ahead and invite them."

Sita continued to eat. She looked at her husband. It seems he had a lot of faith in the words of the waitress, eating like he had not eaten in weeks. She could not swallow a bite. Is he really enjoying it? Is he really aware what he is eating? She heard voices from behind.

“Have any plans for Friday?”

“Why?”

Sita turned her head to a side a little and tried to see them without making it that obvious. She noticed a couple of kids, a boy and a girl, probably 15 or 16.

“There is a small restaurant outside town.”

Sita imagined the expression on their faces. Probably he is looking at her mischievously and may be she is raising eyebrows with curiosity.

“Really. Good food too.”

“We’ll see,” said the girl.

“We can go to a movie later.”

“I’ll call you.”

“How about sevenish?”

Sita took a deep breath.

“What is that for?” Sitapati asked.

“Nothing. I was listening to the conversation of the kids behind me.”

“What is that about?”

“It is funny. In our families the adults go to so much trouble to arrange a marriage. Here the kids go to as much trouble to impress each other.”

Waitress showed up again.

“Any dessert today?”

“You order,” Sitapati asked his wife again.

“I don’t want anything.”

“Have ice cream. You like ice cream.”

“Okay.”

He ordered two ice creams and lost in his own thoughts again.

The group at the other table started singing “happy birthday to you”. All the guests at all the tables looked up. After the song the birthday baby blew away the 16 candles. Everybody clapped. Sita also clapped. Sitapati was miles away. Sita did not feel like eating ice cream.

“Why?” Sitapati asked and without waiting for her reply finished her share also.

Suddenly Sita remembered Parvati. She met Parvati about four years back in the airport, on her way to India.

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Due to dense fog, flights were cancelled. She was standing in the corridor and looking around and noticed another Telugu woman. Parvati’s face lit up like firecrackers. They started chatting.

Parvati came to the airport to receive her mother. Since the flights were cancelled Parvati was about to return home alone. She invited Sita to her place for the night. Sita felt a little

embarrassed but Parvati would not let go. She said her home was not far from the airport and there was nobody else in the house.

“This is what we miss most in this country. I mean the meaningless chat. I was born in a small village. You know how it is. We stand at the front door or gather near the village well and get in to chatting like “what curry” “what is new in town?” “Is that a new saree?” Here we have neither time nor people to get in to such chatting,” commented Parvati with a nostalgic look on her face. Sita realized something about Parvati just then. Parvati is five months pregnant. With her arm around her shoulder she said, “Okay, let’s go.”

“Are you done?” Sitapati asked.

“What?” She came to the present with a jerk.

“Listening to others’ conversations,” Sitapati said sarcastically.

“Well. I’d listen to you if you talk,” she snapped.

“Alright. Let’s go,” he got up, leaving some cash for tip.

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As soon as they opened the door, the phone started ringing. Sitapati rushed to pick up the phone.

Sita sighed, “Anniversary is over.” She threw herself in to the couch and turned on the TV.

Somebody must have said “happy anniversary” on the other end. Sitapati thanked them. By the time he finished talking, one sitcom is over and a second one started.

“What are you watching?”

“Some sitcom.”

“Stupid show. Turn it off.”

Before Sita could say something, the phone rang again. Saved by the bell. He would not be back for another half hour. Sita could never understand that part. He could spend hours talking to somebody on the phone. But when she tried to strike a conversation, he would put an end to the conversation with “yup” and “nope”. He had no problem chatting with the young and old, men and women, pundits and the ignorant, white or colored... anybody except her. How come? Is it possible that in his opinion she does not belong in any of these categories? While he is at home he acts like he is on pins and needles, waiting for that phone call. No matter from whom, as long as there is call. Probably he has taken a full-page ad and told them that anybody could call him anytime of the day. And it also appears that they all have taken him for his word. They do call him at all times as if to please him, without thinking twice about the family he is supposed to have ...

Sita got tired of watching TV. She turned it off and went in to the bedroom and picked up a book to read. After almost an hour Sitapati came in. In her mind the mantra of a daily ritual flashed through—“*pushpam samarpayami* (I am offering flowers), *achamaneeyam samarpayami* (offering water)”.

“Are you done talking?” she said, somewhat annoyed.

“You know the TANA conference is fast approaching. They want my advice. What can I say?” he replied, slipping in to his pajamas.

“It is always something or other. I am not sure of the Almighty Lord but I am sure the world will come to an end without your help.”

“Well, we all have to do our share.”

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In the middle of the night the phone rang again. Sita woke up for the noise.

“Wait, I will take it in the other room,” Sitapati said, getting up from the bed.

Sita turned over wondering how the other party could be so insensitive. He might have told them they could call at all odd times but should they not have some sense? Sitapati was not on the phone for long. But it was quarter to 4 by the time he returned to bed. Sita was just about to doze off.

“Where did you go?”

“Hush. Lower your voice.”

“Why?”

“Komala is in the next room.”

“What?” Sita asked, startled.

“For sometime, they are having marital problems, I mean Komala and Bhaskaram.”

“They are having marital problems. And so you brought her to our house in the middle of the night?” Sita could not believe it.

“Go to bed. We will see what we can do tomorrow.”

Sita was furious.

“Of course, I’d go to bed. What else can I do? First explain to me why you have to go in the middle of the night and bring her here,” she asked gnashing teeth. She knew that it was a hobby for her husband to run to rescue the damsels in distress. Where is he going to draw the line?

Sitapati explained calmly. “Don’t talk like a blockhead. Bhaskaram has been fooling around with a woman in his office. Now he brought her home. He says he would marry her.”

Sita was not sure whether she should laugh or cry. “I must be a blockhead really. This is beyond my comprehension. Bhaskaram brought some woman to his house and so you went and brought his wife to our house?”

“Don’t be silly. This is totally different. Can’t you see?”

“Obviously, you have to tell me what I can and can’t see. Now you tell me whom should I call? Whom should I tell that my husband has brought another woman to our house?”

“How can you talk like that? Are you kidding? You know I am not that kind of a man. If you really suspect my intensions, I will drop her off at her home right now. Just say it,” he said.

Sita could not speak for irritation. She did not suspect her husband. But she could not understand this wild gusto of his either. His rescue missions were getting to her.

“So what do you think you would do now?”

“Let’s see. Think of something in the morning. Her brother is Canada. I’ll call him and tell him and put her on the plane. Then our job is done.”

Suddenly, Sita felt like she was watching a movie. “What happened?” she asked him.

“He is a stupid fellow. Look at Komala. She is smart, beautiful, and everything anybody could ask for.”

“Then what is his problem?”

“He says he is helping the other woman to get her immigration status.”

Sita was lost for words. She pushed away her husband and turned to the other side. She knew her husband was kind to women in general. She also believed like the famous writer Lata that men in our country supported women, and unlike Ranganayakamma who argued that men were categorically hell-bent on ill-treating women. In fact Sita appreciated her husband’s kind heart to start with. In her natal home nobody ever put her down for being a female. Nobody ever told her “Go to the kitchen. Act like a woman.” After her marriage she did not hear such language from her husband either. So it was hard to digest what was going on now. She was confused as to when “help” crosses the line. When one can say, “enough is enough”, “this is inappropriate”? Where are the meters that can measure kindness?

She decided to see about it the next morning. “Make or break,” she told herself.

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She could not “make or break” the next morning.

It was still a little dark. She woke up, finished her daily worship and was about to sit down with her cup of coffee.

Komala walked in slowly as if she was walking on burning coal. Her eyes sunk in. Face was pale, looked like she was ready to break down any second.

Sita was taken aback. After a few seconds she collected herself, “Come. Here, have some coffee,” she said pushing her cup towards Komala.

“No. You have it.” Komala said. Her voice was hardly audible.

Sita thought of Parvati again. We all have the same problem. Living ten thousand miles away from mom and home, the one thing we can never get over is the family support we had back there.

Sitapati put Komala on plane that afternoon and returned home. “Calmed down?” he asked Sita in a lighter vein.

“You never get it, do you? You saw only my anger but not my frustration,” Sita replied.

“Look. She is in trouble. I helped her. What is wrong with that? Do you really expect me to do nothing?”

“I am not talking about this specific instance. I agree that in this case it is justified. But you are always on a mission with the same passion. You would jump and run if some woman broke a nail in much the same way. It is the amount of time you spend rescuing others and ignoring that there is a person at home who might want your attention...”

“Alright. Next time I will consult you. I will ask for your approval first,” he said in the same mocking tone.

Sita understood that his words meant nothing but she had no answer for that kind of language.  
How can you fight with someone who has thrown in his towel?

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So what happens next?

Well, Sitapati suggests they would go out to eat.

Then the phone rings...

It is just like the same ritual performed everyday inanely!

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(Hindus traditionally perform a daily ritual, which involves several physical motions. Sometimes people go through these motions almost involuntarily, unmindful of the underlying philosophy. For foreigners the local customs can become such meaningless motions, just a peripheral activity. Dining out is just that if not understood as time for communication, a way of “being together.” That sets tone for the rest of the story - Author.

(The Telugu original *devi puja* was published in Swati monthly, 1988.)

## 14. SHORTCHANGING FEMINISM

“You held me tight in your strong arms.”

Sita was in the living room holding the 8-page letter Gayatri had written to Sita’s husband Sitapati. The letter left a bad taste in her mouth. Her face turned pale.

Sitapati was acting strange for a few days now. Sita noticed that much. All of a sudden, for no obvious reason, he became an ideal husband. He started doing chores, rearranging the furniture, washing dishes, folding clothes and was even eager to take children for a ride. But the children were not little anymore. They were grown up. So they’d say, “Thanks, dad!” and take off on their bikes.

Sita threw down the letter. No need to read this to the end, she told herself. Her eyes wandered around the room and came back to the same sheets again.

“That one-day... after 23 years...”

“You said you’d take me to...”

“Your secret letter...”

“The thing you’ve forgotten in our bathroom...”

Sita was burning inside. She wanted to stomp on those papers. But she could not; after all the paper is Goddess Saraswati ! ... It made no sense he would go to all this trouble just to cover up his games with Gayatri? At first, she was surprised at her husband’s sudden interest in the household chores. But then she convinced herself that he had changed much the same way she had. They both had to deal with the culture shock, so to speak. Now she was beginning to see the clear light of the day. Sitapati had gone to India as a visiting professor and returned home, after six months, a whole new Sitapati! He was not the same person she had spent the last 17 years with.

One day he made coffee by the time she woke up. “What is this? It almost looks like you have learned quite a few things in India. What did you do there, teach or learn?” she said teasingly.

“Well, we all learn at some point, right?” he replied facetiously.

Sita’s eyes fell on the letter again. “The thing you’ve forgotten in our bathroom.” What could that be? What is it that a man would take off, leave in the bathroom and forget it? It’s got to be his wristwatch or lungi. Of course, nobody walks around without his lungi on. That has got to be his wristwatch. She remembered that Sitapati told her that his watch broke while he was in India.

She stooped forward and picked up the letter. What should she do now? Casually hand them over to him saying, ‘Here, these are yours?’ Hide them? Burn them? Even as she continued to brood, she tore them up, unwittingly. “The world is not going to fall apart if he doesn’t see this one letter,” she told herself.



“You have been cooking for 17 years without a break. I will cook for you today. Tell me. What would you like to eat?” Sitapati walked in boisterously only to find Sita was not in the room. He was a little puzzled. Rani and Bobby were not home. He found Sita in the bedroom.

“Lying down at this hour? Are you okay?” he approached her and felt her forehead to see if she was running temperature.

She pushed away his hand. “Who is Gayatri?”

“Just a friend from childhood days.” He said casually.

“Friendly enough for hugs and kisses?”

“Who kissed?”

The argument went on for about a half hour. Then Sita gave up. Not because she believed him, but she was no match for him in debates. Sitapati however was content. In his mind, he did nothing wrong. Gayatri poured her heart out in the letter. He felt bad for her and so he put his arm around her shoulder just to comfort her. What else could he do? That had been so always, ever since his childhood. Any time somebody was hurt his heart cried for that person. That was one thing he could never understand--what is wrong if one person embraces another? It certainly was not like he had broken his marriage vows to his wife anymore than Gayatri had broken her vows to her husband. Certainly there is no reason for raising hullabaloo about it.

Sita thought there would be no more secrets after her confrontation. She was wrong. That night she heard him take a phone call from India. She expected him to tell her about it the next day. It did not happen. Once again she was confused. Why would one phone somebody from half way across the world in the middle of the night if it was not an emergency? She decided to let go of it.

Next day Sitapati brought mail from the mailbox, slipped one letter into his pocket and handed the rest of the mail to Sita. “I can wait,” he said with a touch of sarcasm. Sita felt firecrackers explode in her head. There is a Telugu proverb, a woman good at flirting is good at lying too. She wondered why this proverb was stated with reference to women only. That day Sitapati vacuumed the rooms with renewed vigor. He bought presents for the children on some lame excuse. He even took Sita to a movie. Sita also was acting as if nothing had happened. The pain in her stomach lingered on though.

The following day Sitapati left for a conference in Philadelphia. That afternoon a telegram came in the mail. “The boy got admission in the local college,” it said. That was also from the same Gayatri. Sita was getting more and more annoyed. Somebody’s boy was admitted in some college? Does that call for a telegram? Or, is it possible that the boy is not “somebody’s boy”? Sita felt sick in her stomach again. Her husband apparently was hiding something from her. What was it? And why? At this point she was certain of only one thing--she could not rest until she knew the whole truth. Maybe, it was needed to understand him, maybe for her own satisfaction. She had to know the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There was no point in asking him either. In the past 15 days he never gave her straight answers. He was beating around the bush smoothly, kindly, arrogantly, snootily, angrily... He was shutting her up every which way but did no sign of coming clean.

A few months back, Sita told her husband, “Listen. I don’t trust your words and I don’t want to discuss this matter with others either. That is why I am asking you straight.”

Sitapati did his usual routine. "I hate lying," he said. "It hurts to think that you don't believe me," he said. "What about my reputation," he said.

"Hell with it," Sita told herself in desperation. Then, something occurred to her. She got up with a jolt and went in to the basement and looked around. It did not take even 5 minutes. There were letters, pictures of two women, and a phone number scribbled on a piece of paper. Sita threw herself down in a chair with the letters in her hand. The letters were written by not one woman, not two but three women.

"My husband is not in town. I am holding a new sari..."

"I wish I could come there and live with you..."

"Next time you come, you must stay only with me..."

"Loneliness, depression..."

"Forget your analytical skills. You're the king of experience for sure."

"I want to put my arms around your neck."

"I want to nibble your earlobes."

Sita threw down the letters, gasping for breath. Then she picked them up again and looked at the dates. Some of them had been received here and some while he was in India. Thoughts started hovering in her head like bumblebees. A small smile came on to her lips. So many women in America argued with her that Indian women are oppressed. These letters vouch for the complete freedom Indian women have achieved. The question is what these women are doing with that freedom? These photos and letters did not look like it was just about friendship. It did not look like a matter of simple sobbing and comforting. "King of experience," it says. What experience? Did the experience precede or follow his critique? Did she offer experience in exchange for his critique? Or, is it the other way round? Not bad. Not bad at all. Next time he goes to India, he might as well announce, "Consult Sitapati for experience-filled critique!"

She looked at the photos again. One of them seemed to be very young. That could be Sobha. Had he married in time, he could have had a daughter of that age. Sita felt sick. She was disgusted. God, tell me what to do? I want to do something desperate. But what? Take the car for a ride and hit a tree? Kill somebody—him, the children, those women, whom? Whom could I kill? How about confront those women? But then what can I ask? What is there to ask? I should be asking my husband only. What can I say to him? What is this game with married women? Why fool around with mothers? What kind of pleasure you get in playing a second husband? Sita felt like there were really no questions she could ask.

Sita closed her eyes for a second. What was the crux of her problem? She was not able to see it herself. Like Major Barbara in the Shaw's play, she stood on a rock she thought eternal; and without a word of warning, it reeled and crumbled under her feet. She hoped that Sitapati would cherish some values even if he did not believe in our culture or religion. She expected him to show some decency at the very least. Probably that is what was bothering her most. He was lying to her. But she could not figure out why. What did he hope to accomplish by that? She heard garage door open. Sitapati walked into the room.

"I saw the letters," Sita said.

"What letters?"

“The ones from your female friends.”

“Not again. I told you that there is nothing going on. Didn’t I?”

“The letters are saying a different story.”

Back to square one.

“They are after me. I am not after them,” he said. “Nothing happened,” he added. “Nothing that you should worry about.” Then he continued to explain. “Something terrible happened in Gayatri’s life that led to depression. I was trying to help her restore her self-esteem.” And he also said that Sobha was a writer and that that’s how the women writers write. Then he asked in all earnestness, “What can I do if they write like that?” Then he assured her that he would tell them to stop writing like that.

Sita did not believe a word he had said but kept quiet.

“Stop all those stupid thought. Let’s go out,” Sitapati suggested.

“I am not going anywhere. The children will be back any minute,” Sita said crossly.

“It’s okay. They are not babies. They can take care of themselves.”

Sita went into the next room without saying a word.

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Sitapati was in the basement studying. Sita was in the bedroom. She thought her skull would crack open with frustration - why did my life turn like this? I’ve been adjusting to his needs the best I could. In this god-forsaken country, to whom could I turn if not him? And what is my life like here? My day is nothing but making coffee, fixing breakfast, packing lunch, driving children to school, again bringing them back home, shopping, cleaning, washing dishes, washing clothes, snow blowing in winter, lawn mowing in summer, raking leaves in fall...No.

These chores do not tire me out but they sure do take the entire time of each day. Amidst all this, if I find a free minute, I would rather sit doing nothing than get myself busy with something, don’t even feel like write a letter. In this amazing land of affluence, with all the gadgets, if I want a cup of coffee, I have to make myself or forget it. Hell. There are times when I skipped the idea of making a cup of coffee for myself simply because it entails washing three dishes. And then the food. I have to have Indian curries at least once in two days. For the children all the three meals must be in American style. And for Sitapati, of course he does not spell it out but he does have his preferences....

Amidst all this Sita could neither account for her time nor say she had plenty of free time. It was catch 22 for her. Sitapati did not follow any traditions except the one that included having guests constantly. His complaint was Sita was not living up to his idea of a traditional wife. Is that the reason that he is running after other women? Sita felt totally debilitated. A weak smile came on her face. God knows whether Sitapati reinstated self-esteem in Gayatri or not, but right now her own self-esteem hit the bottom. She felt like crying but could not. She wanted to talk to somebody. But with whom? Till now she always was listening to others but never took her problems to them. She started remembering all those friends, one by one. No. There is no use. It is not going to happen. It is not like back home. Here you cannot go to somebody’s home anytime as you please. “We have plans,” they’d say. “We didn’t expect you,” they’d say. “Please call next time,” they’d say.

How about a movie, Sita wondered. Her body refused to move. She turned the TV on. Some soap. A wife sees a photo of another woman in her husband's pocket. Sita laughed. No matter where she turns, the story is the same. She was about to turn it off and then again changed her mind. She wanted to see what would happen in the story. She knew life was not like movies but then there was some consolation. The TV wife started drinking to forget her problems. What if I start drinking? But the problem in drinking is you need to drink until you forget everything. Then you don't know whether you found a solution or not. Probably I would frighten the children. She recalled the proverb, *you try to make a pundit but it turns into a monkey*.

Sita felt like she was losing her mind. She wanted to do something drastic but was not sure what it was. She picked up the phone and called her friend Kamakshi.

"Hello!"

"It's me."

"Oh. How are you? What is new?"

"Nothing. What is for lunch?"

She heard a small laugh. "Stuffed eggplant. Want to come?"

"Are you kidding? You'd better be careful. I might show up."

"I am not kidding. Come on."

"Okay. Be there in ten minutes," Sita said and hung up.

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"I can't live in that house."

Kamakshi stared at her and said softly, "Want coffee?"

Sita nodded and started telling her story.

"Did you ask him?"

"I did. I also told him that I wanted to keep it between him and me, not take it to others. He blabbered some nonsense, as usual. You know his rhetorical skills. It sounds okay for the moment. And then some letter or some note shows up, making it only too obvious that they have him wrapped around their little fingers."

Kamakshi did not know what to say. As far as she had known, both the husband and wife were reasonable people, both knew right from wrong.

"The more I think about it, the clearer it is getting. It is not just that one question—whether he slept with one woman or not. In the past ten years, he has always been so wrapped up in the lives of others, both men and women—their problems, their worries, their tears, their health, their children's education, their marriages. That is his life. And now it has gotten down to hugs, kisses and lies. Then why should I worry about our traditional values? His 'saving women program' has reached the peak." Sita stopped.

"Like Veeresalingam?" Kamakshi said partly in jest, trying to clear the air.

"Yes," Sita replied, and then with a weak smile, added, "No. Actually there is a difference. Veeresalingam tried to save the *vidhava* [widows] by arranging remarriages for them. Here this

man is messing around with housewives, making their husbands *vedhava* [idiots].”

Kamakshi could not resist a laugh. Sita stayed there for another 15 minutes and left. At the door, Kamakshi said a few more kind words and told her not to act in haste.

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Sita felt a little lighter after talking with Kamakshi but the pain did not go away. Her heart was numb. On many occasions, she participated in debates about the situation of women in India. Not only with other Americans but also with Sitapati. She argued that in Andhra Pradesh men always supported women.

Sitapati did not agree with her.

“Veeresalingam arranged marriages only for young widows for fear that they would seduce men. Even women’s education he promoted was only to make women the dutiful housewives.” His arguments in regard to Chalam were also similar. He said Chalam advocated sexual freedom for women only to ingratiate men. What an irony? Now one woman complained that her husband was ill-treating her and another woman claimed that her husband allowed her total freedom. And Sitapati took them both to the bed! Wow!

Sita felt like hitting her head against the wall.

That night after one more round of wrestling, each of them said ‘go to hell,’ and then split. He went into the basement and she went into the bedroom. Sita wanted to believe her husband’s words. He never acted like a total jerk in the past 17 years. Besides, if he really wanted to fool around, aren’t there plenty of opportunities here in America? Why did he wait this long? Why so far away? What kind of secrecy is this? Such a joke! What should she think? Is he too smart or too stupid? Or does he think she is stupid?

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One week went by. Sita went into the basement for some book. A letter slipped for a book and fell on the floor. The letter was addressed to Gayatri. Sita was taken aback. This is the third time it happened. She recalled a couple of lines Rani wrote when she was 9 years old: “Believe me they say, trust me they say, and when I trust them, everything goes wrong.” A smart observation for a nine-year old! What is this? At a time she was trying to convince herself, she found four more letters—two of them from the other women, and the other two from Sitapati to them. Sita felt dizzy. She threw herself in the chair. Even the dumbest of the dumb would know when they saw these letters that Sitapati had been bluffing all along.

“I want to hug you.”

“I want to kiss you.”

“I want to go to Khajuraho with you.”

“I am surprised that you know so much about birthmarks.”

“Now the room is vacant. This time, no problem. No problem with the children.”

“Bring me size 34 bra. Bring me gold. Bring me nylon saris. Bring me camera.”

Sita stopped for a minute as if to make sense of all this. And then she continued to read again. The letter that shot through her heart was the one written by Sitapati to Sobha. You have a right to hug me. You have a right to kiss me. You have a right to go to Khajuraho with me.

Sita choked with anger. She came upstairs, holding the letters in her hand. She sat down slowly in the couch. The snow outside was bright white like a heap of salt. Sitapati said in his letter 'you have a right to hug me and kiss me'. Sita wondered, "So what are my rights? Snow blowing, lawn mowing, washing clothes and dishes? Is that it?" She recalled her words to Sitapati during one of their arguments, "If you think I will stay here just to protect your reputation while you mess around with others, you are wrong. Don't count on it."

It is clear now. She decided that she could not stay in that house anymore, not a minute longer. She decided to leave. Then she felt the burden off her chest. For the first time in several days she felt hungry. She got up and started cooking. *'You are the only one who understood me. This time I may not stay long.'* The lines from the letters were pestering her like hungry dogs. Suddenly she remembered the letters she wrote to her husband in the first few weeks of her marriage. She knew where he kept them. She quickly went in to the basement again and pulled them out. She started reading them.

"Here also the sky is blue and the weather is cool."

"With the new status I attained after walking the seven steps with you..."

"When I asked you 'what do you want' and you responded 'you just come'..."

"Each person has so many layers of personalities. If you had seen me in my office..."

"Waiting for the day when I can walk with a friend in the woods and whisper solitude is sweet..."

She was exhausted, totally, absolutely exhausted. For the first time, tears sprang to her eyes. Sita did not get the life companion she was looking for. And he? Only he should know. She kept racking her brains. What happened in 17 years? Why? He did not hit her. He did not use obnoxious language. On the other hand, he had told her repeatedly that she could do whatever she wanted. But, by the time she understood that, she also realized that his job and avocations stood in her way to do whatever she wanted to do. Six years passed by. In the freedom Sitapati allowed her, there were a lot of built in responsibilities—money management, part-time job, children's needs, guests' needs, household chores. ... He kept telling her "you do such a great job" and left everything to her. And he got used to spending time with his friends.

Sita tried to understand from his perspective. He often said, "I leave home at 7:00 in the morning and return at 6:00 in the evening. During that period I struggle to keep the job, work for promotions, try to prove my value to the establishment, to please everybody, it is almost like prostituting myself. After a long day, what is wrong if I want my wife to welcome me with a smiling face? What is wrong if I ask about the children? If I have to observe formalities with my wife also, why marry at all? In America wives buy shirts for their husbands. You would not buy clothes for me. I love beauty in nature. But if I say 'you are beautiful' you are annoyed..."

Sita took a deep breath. That was his argument. Maybe there was some truth to it. But she was annoyed that he did not take into account all the chores she had to do. He complained that she was not acting like an American wife. But he did not do half the things the American husbands do. In fact look what he is doing—fooling around with 2 or 3 women? Even that shows that his dream girl is a composite picture, a collage. During one of their arguments three years back, Sita said, "If that is your idea of a wife, you might as well look elsewhere."

He said, "If you think I would go to another woman, you don't know anything about me."

That was three years back. Now...? That's life, I guess. Days and months go by without we noticing it. People change without announcement. Their thoughts and opinions change unconsciously.

Ding, ding, ding... Fire alarm went off. Sita rushed in to the kitchen. The curry got burned, turned into charcoal and started heavy smoke. She turned off the range, and went into the bedroom. She stooped to pull out the suitcase from under the bed. The *tali* in her neck from under her sari folds jingled, like cowbells. Yes, they jingled just like cowbells. *Sitapati has changed. His values have changed. Today he is giving a new definition for the word marriage.* Sita removed the *tali* from her neck and threw it in the suitcase. She heard garage door open.

Sitapati walked in. He did not find Sita in the living room. Went in to the bedroom looking for her. "What now?" he said looking at her.

"I am moving out," Sita said, busy packing her suitcase.

Sitapati laughed. "What happened now?" He went to her and laid his hand on her hair gently.

She pushed away his hand. "Don't touch me, never again," she said and added, "I have warned you. I am not going to live here with you as one of your sluts."

"What?" Sitapati said, surprised.

Sita continued as if she was narrating somebody else's story, "I never called anybody a slut. Today it came out of my mouth very naturally. I don't know how."

"Wow! Have you become a militant feminist or what, all of a sudden?"

"No. I did not become anything. I am and have always been the same. Great pundits like you read volumes of literature, deliver soapbox lectures, and produce more literature. And then there are women like Sobha and Gayatri that keep blabbering about sympathy and empathy like the wrestlers in a rut. They need to be saved and you are there to save them. You all need each other, and deserve each other. I am one of the millions of ordinary Sitas who do not belong in either category. I spend my days, weeks and months like a bullock-cart on a country road, enjoying the peace and quiet while you rush to save the world with your pedantic brain waves and heated debates. But then I am not any less of a person just because you don't think so. Didn't you hear the proverb--the turtles slither and the deer hop. That's their nature. Each person has her own lifestyle," Sita said unemotionally.

Then she added, looking straight into his face, "Isn't it ironical that you lecture about female voices, hear female voices across five continents but not the one that is talking to you directly and right under your own roof?"

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(The Telugu original, *nijaniki feminijaaniki madhya* was published in *Andhra Prabha* weekly in September 1987. Eventually it has been published in several magazines and included in a few anthologies.)

## 15. THE VERVE OF A TENDER SHOOT

“Mommy...” Kinjalka came running, from school.

“Ah! Don’t jump on me, like that,” Sarada said, annoyed a little. Kinjalka’s face fell.

Sarada noticed her mistake. “Come here,” she said, pulling her close.

That’s all the little Kinjalka wanted. How would she know the havoc in mommy’s heart?

Sarada could not explain it either. Poor thing. A simple “Come here” was enough to please her!

Kinjalka showed the picture she had drawn at her school. “See. This is for you,” she said.

“Beautiful. I like it very much. I’ll put it on the refrigerator,” Sarada said.

Kinjalka’s face blossomed like an early morning bud.

Murari walked in. “Here, a telegram from your mother,” he said, throwing the piece of paper in her lap.

“Telegram?” Apparently it was a surprise for her too!

“Ha! She is coming at the end of this month.”

Sarada did not say anything.

“Send another to her; tell her this is not a good time,” he said, trying to be casual about it.

“Ah?!” Sarada was almost shocked.

“I mean...” He did not finish the sentence.

“It has been over ten years now. Not a weekend passes by without setting one more plate at the table, all your friends. Now, for once, one person, actually my mother to be specific, would like to visit us; and, you want me to tell her that this is not a good time?”

“You know what I mean. Do you, honestly, believe that she can have a good time under the circumstances?”

Sarada turned to Kinjalka and said, “Grandma is coming.”

“Really! When?” Kinjalka felt elated at the prospect. She did not spend a lot of time with grandma, but remembered her very well, because of all the gifts that had been coming from her. Grandma sent silk outfits and jewelry through friends, traveling back and forth.

“So, are you going to do it, or should I?” Murari pressed for an answer.

“I won’t,” Sarada replied, watching Kinjalka, who was playing with her saree palloo. The atmosphere in the room was getting tense; and that showed up in the little face.

Sarada added, “See this. She drew it at school today.” She showed the picture to him.

“Wow! Beautiful. You will become a great artist, one day. You know, my cousin on my father’s side, thrice removed, is an artist. It is in your genes,” he said enthusiastically.



“I will make one for you tomorrow, daddy,” Kinjalka said, expressing her sense of fairness. She did not want daddy to feel left out.

“I’ll put it on the fridge. We all can enjoy it,” Sarada repeated her offer.

“Come. Let’s go shopping.”

“What for? Why now?”

“Your birthday is coming soon. Isn’t it?”

“Not yet, you silly,” Kinjalka said, with a naughty smile.

“I know that, you silly! Just in case I am not in town at the time,” he replied.

Sarada sighed, and got up to go to the kitchen.

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Mother arrived on the day as planned. Sarada went to the airport and brought her home.

Kinjalka jumped at her like a baby leopard, even at the door, singing “ammummaa ...”

Mother’s face lit up like a hundred-watt bulb. She would not mind traveling ten thousand miles for that brief moment!

She stroked the little girl’s cheeks gently, and said, “You are so thin. What is your mom feeding you?”

Kinjalka cracked up, “I told you.”

“Look. I don’t understand all this wishy-washy language. You must talk to me in Telugu,” said mother.

“Okay,” Kinjalka shrugged her shoulders as she replied in English.

Sarada explained with a smile. “In India, people always say ‘you’re losing weight’ all the time; as a matter of concern, you know! She thinks it’s funny,” and added, “Come in. I will show you the bathroom.”

While mother was freshening up, Sarada made coffee. After taking a sip, mother opened her suitcase and started pulling out the gifts—a silk saree for Sarada, a pair of dhoti for Murari, a silk skirt, and jewelry for Kinjalka...

Kinjalka could hardly contain her joy, for all the gifts she was getting.

Sarada’s heart sank.

Murari left the room, sulking.

“You shouldn’t have gotten all these things. There is no need...” Sarada mumbled, trying to hide her heartache.

Mother kept quiet.

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Mother kept herself busy with Kinjalka. She started teaching the little one, songs and games, playing with her, getting her ready for school, and putting her to bed.

There was one song Kinjalka liked very much, and learned to sing quickly.

*chitti chilkamma, amma kottindaa?*

(Little birdie, Did your mom spank you?)

*thota kellaavaa? pandu thechaavaa?*

(You went to the grove? Brought a fruit?)

*gutlo pettaavaa? Gutukku mingaavaa?*

(Put it in the cupboard? Gobbled it up in a snap?)

Kinjalka started singing ‘chitti chilkamma, kinjalkamma’. It was fun, to build her name into the song. Mother tried to correct it but Kinjalka would not listen.

“My mommy will never spank me,” she said firmly.

Mother tried to explain that it was not about her mom; that was the way the song was sung.

Sarada laughed. “You can’t argue with her,” she said.

The phone rang. Sarada picked it up and said, “hello!”.

Revati was at the other end. She called to invite the family for dinner on Saturday.

“I heard your mother came from India. How was the flight? How is she? Please, bring her along,” Revati added.

In the evening, Sarada told Murari about the dinner invitation.

“I am busy. You all can go,” he said.

“Come on, daddy. It will be fun. You like Vishnu uncle too!” Kinjalka wanted him to go with them.

“Not now. I have work to do. We will see next time,” he replied.

“You tell him,” Kinjalka said to her mother. She would not let go.

“May be, you can make time for this once. All the other children come with both the parents,” Sarada tried to be as specific as possible.

“I will go with you next time, I promise,” he was just as stubborn.

Sarada started gathering clothes to wash, and asked her mother for her clothes too for washing.

While sorting the clothes, she felt something in Kinjalka’s pocket. It was a pack of cigarettes.

“It’s not mine,” Kinjalka said.

“How did it get into your pocket?”

Kinjalka closed her lips tight.

“Come on. You have to tell me. How did they get into your pocket, if they are not yours?”

Sarada asked tauntingly.

“I am telling you. They are not mine.”

“What happened?” Murari walked in.

He heard the story and hit the roof. Hell was let loose.

He starting stomping all over the living room. He wanted to know what Sarada was doing while the child was taking to bad habits; Isn't it her job to take care of the child? Isn't it her responsibility to teach the child the correct habits and good behavior? Today, she started with cigarettes, and tomorrow she would steal cars... Mom is at home doing what?

"That's cute. If she shows talent, it's in dad's genes; and, if she errs, that's mom's fault," Sarada commented calmly.

"Stop, daddy! It is not mommy's fault," Kinjalka said.

"Never mind whose fault. How did they get into your pocket?" he insisted.

After a few minutes of wrangling, Kinjalka finally let the cat out of the bag--a boy from the fifth grade had asked her to save the pack for him; he was afraid that his mother would kill him, if she found out.

"There is a smart idea! What are you thinking? Your mommy would give you a big hug and pat you on the back?" mother said sharply.

"My mommy won't spank me," Kinjalka said, pouting.

Sarada was losing heart. "Please, mother! Let me handle this," she said meekly.

"A fine way to raise a kid," mother said, seized the child by the arm, and whisked her away into the next room. Instinctively, she knew that the husband and the wife would get into an argument and that would not be good thing for the child to watch.

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At night, Sarada lay down next to the child in her bed and tried to talk to her. In this country, people would say, "Talk, talk, talk." But, she never knew how to do that. She did not grow up "talking" to the parents. They talked, and she listened. She did not find anything wrong with that either. Actually, she became a good listener, in the process! Now, it was time for her to talk; but, the child was growing up in a different culture, with a different set of values.

Sarada could not figure out a viable way, between these two streams!

"Are you angry with me?" she asked, after what seemed to be an eternity.

"No," the child replied.

"Do you want to talk?"

"No."

"Do you want to talk to someone else?" Sarada asked, holding her breath.

"Can I?" Kinjalka almost jumped at the prospect.

Sarada felt a thump in her heart.

"With whom? Amy?"

"No."

"Why not? You've been friends all your lives."

“Her mom says you will leave us.”

Oh God! Her words felt like a whip lashed out across her face. She held the child tight to her bosom.

For the first time, a huge fit of sorrow leapt to her throat, like a massive tidal wave. All this time, she was thinking, only about the other children, who might give Kinjalka hard time. She never thought, that other mothers could be as cruel! All along, she was looking at the problem as her own. People were asking her how she (Sarada) was doing, but nobody seemed to think how a child would think, how the workings of the little mind would be. Of course, they would do ask, “How is she?” or “How is she taking it?” But, who knows what really was going on in the child’s mind?

“Sorry, mommy” Kinjalka said.

“Oh, no, it is not your fault, it is alright,” Sarada assured her, and stayed with her until she fell asleep.

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Next morning, she woke up early to make coffee. Mother walked in, and asked, “Did she sleep okay with you?”

Sarada was confused. “What are you talking about?”

Kinjalka woke up in the middle of the night, and said that she would sleep in mommy’s bed and left mother. But, she did not go to mommy. She was nowhere to be found.

Murari heard the noise and woke up.

All the three started searching all the rooms, under the beds, in the closets, in the garage... and even inquired the neighbors ... hoping, and praying, that the child is safe, somewhere ... anywhere.

The phone rang as they were about to call the police.

Janet called to ask if they wanted her to keep Kinjalka for today also.

Janet was a long-time friend. She knew Kinjalka from the day she was born. She also lived in the same neighborhood. It was a five-minute walk, if one took the short-cut, and a ten-minute drive by car.

Relief and anxiety took over; Sarada talked, simultaneously, to Murari and mother on this side, and to Janet, on the other side over the phone. She said that the child was safe, was with Janet, and then told Janet that she would pick her up in a few minutes.

Kinjalka, after telling her grandma that she was going to sleep in her mom’s bed, grabbed some shirt, slipped it on, opened the door, and went straight to Janet’s house. She knocked on the door, and told Janet, that there was some family emergency at home; grandma had to be taken to the hospital, and so, they dropped her off, here, at Janet’s door. Nobody ever thought that Kinjalka could fabricate a story like that, not until now.

Murari was irate like any father would under the circumstances. How could a six-year old child leave home in the middle of the night, like that? What was she thinking? It seems she is past the “talking” stage; he must take some drastic measures to make her understand; yesterday it was

cigarettes, and today running away?... Where will she stop?... How could a mother not know when the child is not home?...

"You two squabble as you please, and as long as you please. I will take the child back to India," mother said.

"I am not going anywhere," Kinjalka said, crossly.

"Pull her out of that school. We will send her to a private school or to a boarding school," Murari said, making the decision on the spot.

"I am not going anywhere," Kinjalka was just as firm.

"First, tell me why did you run away like tha, in the middle of the night?" he asked her straight.

"I did not run away."

"What would you call it leaving home in the middle of the night like that without telling us?"

"I went to see Janet. Janet is nice. She understands."

"Look! You might as well get this straight right here and right now. You are not going to do any such thing again. Understood?"

"I don't have to listen to you."

"Oh, yes, you have to and you will. You must listen to mom and dad. Got it?" Murari nearly screamed. He was losing patience.

"I hate you."

"Shut up. Learn to listen."

"Why?"

" 'Cause I am your dad!"

"Did I ask you to be my dad?"

Wow! Mom and dad were stunned, and looked at each other. Where is she getting these ideas from?

Sarada picked up the child abruptly and took her to her room.

Mother went into the kitchen. Murari disappeared into his office.

Sarada kept thinking all day. "Choices" is a huge buzzword in this country. The grown-ups "choose" to marry whomever and whenever they please; they "choose" to have a child when they think they're ready; they even get to "choose" the gender; and "choose" to get a divorce as and whenever they want. Where is the choice for the child? Does anybody think what the child might "choose" to have or not to have? Who decides what the child wishes to have or not to have? The adults and the courts decide pretty much like kicking a football; and the child falls wherever she is destined to!

Sarada could not help wondering how many children would "choose" to be born into this world--a world brimming with violence, hatred, greed, and selfishness!

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On Saturday, Sarada and Kinjalka asked Murari one more time to go with them. He said he had work to do and stayed home. The others left without him.

At Revati's home, it was an interesting mix. There were about thirty adults and six children. They all were speaking in about half a dozen Indian languages between English phrases and sentences. The atmosphere was funny for mother. She had some knowledge of English but this hybrid language was hard to follow. She sat in a corner, feeling a little lost.

At the other end of the room, Revati's father-in-law, Krishnaya was sitting, looking just as much, amused or lost or both! After his wife had passed away a year ago, his son Vishnu and the daughter-in-law Revati insisted that he move to the States and spend his golden years with them.

Krishnaya and mother struck a conversation.

"How are you managing in this god-forsaken country? It is about a week since I arrived here. I am feeling like the *chataka* bird hanging upside down in the sky. What is it our people see here that is such a big draw?" mother wondered, sounding a little despondent.

Krishnaya smiled complacently. "It is all in our minds. Once we set our mind to it and create an environment for ourselves, these external trappings will not touch us," he said philosophically.

"Probably, you are right."

"Could you please come this way," he said, as he walked toward the fourth bedroom.

Mother and Sarada followed him.

It was a small room, could be a walk-in closet. It was sparkling clean and filled with floor decorations. The traditional designs on the floor; the red and yellow dots, the green mango leaves—all comprised of plastic and oil paints, yet for some reason did not look odd. Against the eastside wall, there was a wood frame built like a little temple. In the center the Goddess Syamaladevi was set looking gorgeous in a silk saree and jewelry.

Krishnaya lit up an incense stick and went into a reverie. In an uplifting voice, he started singing the famous verse, *Syamalaa dandakam*, in praise of the Goddess Syamaladevi...

*Maanikyaveenaam upalaalayanteem madaalasaam...*

The music was from out of this world. Krishnaya was miles away.

*Maatangee, madaalasee, maahendraditya komalaangii...*

Sarada was also lost in the reverberating sounds. She was feeling goosebumps all over.

*Saagaraabdha sangeetha sambhramaalola*

She did not see Kinjalka come in. The little girl was sitting cozily curled up next to her. The child was staring at the entire setup with amazement.

The noises in the next room also subsided.

Krishnaya finished the verse softly like a plane landing and prayed for a few more seconds. After that, he gave them raisins for *prasada*.

Kinjalka held out both her palms reverentially and looked at her mom. Sarada nodded with a little smile. The child took her palms close to her eyes per custom and ate the *prasada*.

Krishnaya gently touched her cheek and said, "You are beautiful like the goddess."

“I know,” Kinjalka replied, narrowing her eyes playfully.

Sarada laughed. “You’ll have to excuse us. We are a little short on humility,” she said apologizing for the girl.

Krishnaya did not laugh. “No! That is good, I must say. We all have to have that self-esteem. That is important for survival,” he said solemnly.

They stayed there for a while and were ready to leave.

“Can you give me a ride?” Raghava asked Sarada. His room was not too far from their home.

“Sure,” she said, and walked toward their car. Raghava sat in the backseat, next to Kinjalka.

Raghava started talking. “I can’t understand our people. Our Indians are so brilliant, yet they act like total morons. Here in the West the scientists are building ladders to the skies. We Indians are still digging deeper and deeper into the nether lands like ostriches. In stead of looking up, we are wallowing in the rut of the outmoded traditions. We continue to believe that the boulders and the tree trunks save us from our miseries. While the West is producing great scientists, we are looking to the stones for rational solutions. Look at Krishnaya. He is an intelligent man I am sure. Why can’t he use his faculties for some logical thinking?”

“So be it, Raghava. We all follow our hearts,” mother said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Yes, madam, I agree. At the same time, what is wrong in developing some concrete mode of thinking. He has a stunning voice. I’ll give it to him. He will be a smash hit if he sings in a concert. But invoking a goddess? Ludicrous, if you ask me! The man is deluded.”

“No, he is not,” Kinjalka said.

Raghava looked at her surprised as if he could not believe what he just had heard.

Sarada looked at both of them in the rear view mirror and turned to mother.

Mother was looking straight ahead; she was very calm.

“I saw her too. She is beautiful,” Kinjalka said again.

For some reason, Raghava did not want to continue his speech anymore. Sarada dropped him at his place and reached home by about 9:30.

Murari and a couple of his friends were playing cards in the living room.

“You said you had work to do,” Kinjalka asked.

“I did. I just finished it. They just got here a few minutes ago. How come you are home early?”

“Mother is not used to staying up late,” Sarada said and went in quickly. She was in no mood to offer explanations to anybody.

She changed into pajamas, and was going to the kitchen for a glass of water. She heard mother talking to Kinjalka and stopped at the door.

“Come with me to India, baby! You can play with grandpa, uncles, aunts, and your cousins. They all can teach you songs, games, and all that, you know,” mother said to Kinjalka.

“No, ammma! I can’t. I have to be here. Mommy and daddy need me. Don’t you worry. That little girl will take care of us,” Kinjalka said.

Sarada forgot about the water. She went straight to bed, and kept thinking about the words Kinjalka said for a long time.

The verse Krishnaya sang was an elaborate description of an adult woman in the prime of her life. Kinjalka called her the “little girl”. That is strange!

But the words that kept coming back to her all night were, “Mommy and dad need me”!

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(The Telugu original *chivurukomma cheva* has been published in Andhra Jyothi weekly. The English version has been published on [www.Sulekha.com](http://www.Sulekha.com) in 2010)



## 16. THE LETTER LASTS FOREVER

The Telugu word for letter [alphabet] is *akshamam*, meaning literally “that which stays forever”.

Due to frequent transfers in my father’s job, I could not finish high school the first time. I had passed the mid-year exam and waited the next six months to go to the college the following year. During that interim period, I had gotten used to shadowing my mother and learned plenty in the process - more than any education I had received in my school. Among the lessons I had learned, the most important ones had come from Sandraalu, the vegetable vendor, who used to come to our door every day with a basket filled with vegetables picked fresh from her garden in the backyard. She brought glistening eggplants, tender okra, and the squash which she would not let me touch. She would say that Brahmin women would not buy them if they see nail marks on it.

Sandraalu had a way with words. She was great in telling about the events in her life like an accomplished narrator. Her stories were imprinted on my mind forever, more than any stories I ever heard anywhere else.

Sandraalu would start with a trite phrase like “nothing lasts forever” and then go into a sweeping narrative of how she had trusted a Christian father, converted to Christianity, realized that the change had not been for the better, returned home, got an earful from her mother-in-law, hopped on a bus and ended in a neighboring village, Simhachalam. In Simhachalam, she had met with Jigini Saibu who was running a small tea stall at the bus stop on the outskirts of the village. He listened to Sandraalu’s story and invited her into his home.

He had said, “You cook for me and I will provide a roof over your head.”

I do not know how many times I have heard this story. Each time it sounded afresh for me. I was never tired of her stories.

One day, I asked her, “How come you are selling vegetables and not fish?” That is because she had told me earlier that she had been a fisherwoman by birth. As usual, she went into a spirited narrative swaying like a vine on a windy day. That is how I had learned about her stormy life. On another day, she said, “That is the thing ma’am. Wretched times, wretched thoughts — they follow on the heels of each other. My man and I had a great life like royalty. The income from the sales of the fish my man had caught was enough for all of us. I brought four kids into this world. Then, that white man came to our village and talked his head off; chewed us up. He said, ‘These high and mighty folks are not treating you well. Are you not people like them? Prick them, they also bleed just like you do, right? They don’t shed milk or honey, right? They don’t let you enter their homes, why? I’m telling you. You come with us. We will give you food, clothes, and let you sit with us in our living rooms.’ He mouthed away big talk and I got carried away. At first, my husband was okay with it but then changed his mind. He said he would not go. My mother-in-law said, ‘You can go but cannot take the kids.’ I went all right ... but what did I gain? Nothing. I ended up doing at his home the same chores I had been doing in the otherouses. One stone is as good as another to knock off your teeth, if you ask me.”

I understood Sandraalu’s words, only partially. The rest was Greek to me. All the same, I was fascinated by her eloquence. I wanted to ask her, “Tell me, what school you had been to? I want

to go to the same school.” She continued, “Listen to me, I am telling you. You were born to that nice lady, right? She is goddess Lakshmi herself. Can you switch her for another woman? No. Nobody can replace your mother. You cannot. That is the way with religion too. You were born into one religion, you grew up with it, and you stay with it. What is the point of running after things? Nothing. We should learn to find happiness in what we have. That is the real wisdom. You are going to college and getting big education. After that, you’ll go away on an airplane to another country, looking for a morsel of food.”

I was amused but the words that I “looking for a morsel of food” jabbed at my heart.

“How do you know?” I asked her.

“I know all these things, little ma’am. After I am done with this basket, I wait at the bus stop round the corner. There, people talk all these things. It is like All India Radio, you know,” she said with a piquant smile.

Sandraalu was mother of four kids. One day I asked her why she did not send them to school. “What do we need all that schooling for, madam? Labor is our life. If we don’t put in our day’s work, we won’t have anything to eat. Unless we eat, we can not work. I earn four rupees a day and the kids bring a rupee each; then we have eight rupees in all. That gets us through the day. For us, the kids are the assets, madam,” she said.

I kept quiet. I did not have the heart to tell her that education is important and that a person without education is nothing. She is telling me survival comes first. You cannot accomplish anything unless you have something to eat first. You need food to live.

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Sandraalu had come to her senses. She understood that switching religion did not bring her prosperity. She returned to her husband and the family but it was too late. Her husband had already found another woman and settled down.

Sandraalu, in despair, jumped on the first bus and arrived in Simhachalam town. She ran into Jigini Sayibu, a tea stall owner, running his stall next to the bus stand. He suggested, “You cook food for me, and I provide a roof over your head.”

Sandraalu said fine. However, she could not sit in the hut all day doing nothing. She was not that kind of woman. She decided to plant a vegetable garden and start her own business. Every day, early in the morning she would pick fresh vegetables and go door to door in the neighboring city and earn a little money of her own.

One day, I asked her, “You say life goes on, and nothing stays forever. You believe that, why aren’t you staying home? Why bother about growing vegetables, taking the bus to the city ... all that hassle? What is the point?”

I asked because she had said her earlier that Jigini sayibu had asked her the same question. He had said to her, “My income from the tea stall is plenty for both of us. Why sell vegetables?”

In response to my question, she said, “Madam, we are human, right? What did the God Almighty say? He said, ‘you do your duty and I will do mine.’ What does that mean? As a human being, you have a dharma. You do what you need to do. Don’t ask what is this or that. No point in hair-splitting legalities.” She went on for the next fifteen minutes lecturing me about the legalities in real life situations. Something in her manner rendered me speechless.

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I live in America now.

Nearly one half of a century passed by yet the words of Sandraalu stayed on my mind as if they were etched in stone, as if I heard them just yesterday or the day before. I sat in my office and was watching through the window the discolored sky like a washed out dhoti, the Maple trees in skeletal state, more like the sages smeared with ashes, standing on one leg and meditating—the entire atmosphere seemed to hold mirror to time, something like a work in progress.

My brain became numb for no reason. At this time I should be on my couch, curled up and sipping hot coffee or munching spicy *pakora*, dissolve into the far-off space. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Sandraalu came to mind. Thirty years have passed by since I had set foot on American soil. In the past twenty years, I had been through seven computers in a crazy attempt to keep up with the fast changing technology; I had been through all the stuff from 5¼ floppy disks to the 3 1/4 inch CDs, which would fit snugly in my palm; switched from desktop to laptop, not to the Blackberry though. Not yet anyways. I was feeling like a beat up ferryboat caught in violent floods, I was stuck on the idea of using the “new and improved” versions that mushroomed the market endlessly. I had to follow them like the groom who would repeat the marital vows in Sanskrit mindlessly after the priest in the traditional wedding ceremony.

I changed the Telugu fonts five times to date. I was following the dictates of technology for the fear of facing the music of disrepair. All my writings would be lost to the posterity and that scared me. I could not let that happen. In reality, all this philosophical self-examination originated from the aggravation caused by my boss. Here is what had happened a year ago.

A Telugu-educated American professor decided to start a company for digitalizing the books in Indian languages. He offered to digitalize the books published in Indian languages, reformat them attractively, and save them for future generations for a fee. He suggested that he would take care of the marketing, if I agreed to do the work as stated above. I knew my brain would fall short miserably when it came to marketing. Therefore, I accepted his proposition.

I was not sure why Telugu people could not have this work done back in Andhra Pradesh itself. After all, most of the software engineers were from Andhra Pradesh. Although I agreed to his proposal tentatively, I was not sure that we would get any business for the same reason, that most of the software engineers were in India and thus it would make sense for them to undertake the project themselves. I was wrong. I did not know how but my boss succeeded in obtaining business from India. To my great surprise, there were people in Andhra Pradesh willing to shell down good money and get the work done in America. Was it the concept of outsourcing that got to them, I did not know. Did they want to be part of this overwhelming globalization? Did they believe the language acquires a new hue in the hands of white folks? I was not sure. It was beyond my wildest imagination but it had happened. We were getting projects for digitalization. Working on the actual project was a different story. I was shocked by the language in the book I was asked to digitalize. To illustrate this part in English was a task in itself. The vocabulary, the grammar and the sentence construction were horrible. I felt lost; no way I could describe the spelling in English for your comprehension. I could not imagine any Telugu man or woman speaking like that, much less writing. From what planet this man or woman had come?

I explained the problems with the text to my boss. “Can we send the book back and ask them to revise and send the correct version?” I asked him politely.

My boss stared at me but was polite though. He leaned forward, put his palms on my desk and said, speaking softly, “Our job is digitalizing whatever we have received. It is not our place to correct their language and grammar.”

I knew I was not supposed to correct them but there were places where any person with any respect for language could not tolerate. And also places where I would have to make a judgement call, which would not fair, given the circumstances.

My boss looked at me as if he was pondering over and then said, “All right. I will contact them. In the meantime, you continue your work the best you can.”

“All right,” I nodded. Maybe I offended him by pointing out the mistakes. Maybe he was offended because I was the one that found them, and not he.

He said, “Our job is to digitalize whatever we are given, not correcting them.”

My spirits started drooping. Reaching out for a panacea, I started surfing Telugu web sites. The computer era is permanent, is here to stay. I would make no mistakes in that regard, no illusions. However, there is a lot that is not permanent within the field of computers. Suddenly a huge wave of depression surged in my heart. Half of the Telugu bloggers are software engineers. They are busy creating new programs and creating new programs to improve the hardware.

I am also part of that consumerism that is eating us away—constantly upgrading and updating the software and the hardware in my computer. I have run through the storage gadgets from 5½ floppies to palm-sized mini CDs and backup drives. I have upgraded my computer one after another from the processors 80 generation to Pentium IV. The Telugu fonts I had started went out of date long time ago. The time I had spent digitalizing my stories had been wasted for all the practical purposes. How many times can I key in my stories? Even PDF files I had created at the time, some of them at least, are not readable on some of the computers anymore.

Samdraalu’s words are ringing in my ears like the bells in the Rama temple. “Nothing stays forever,” she said with conviction. After all these years, it seems to make sense for me, finally.

I opened the book I was supposed to digitalize and started typing away vigorously.

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(The Telugu original *aksharam paramam padam* has been published on [www.eemaata.com](http://www.eemaata.com) and later included in an anthology.)

## 17. GRADING AN LCTL STUDENT!

Kantha, a young woman from India, wife of a geography lecturer Murthy and the mother of a three-year-old boy, landed a job as a Telugu teacher in a Midwestern university. She was not looking for a job. The job fell into her lap, literally.

A couple of decades ago, the U.S. government had realized the need for Americans to learn the languages of other countries, especially the countries in which they had vested interest. India turned out to be one of those countries and Telugu one of those languages, which eventually had come to be known as one of the LCTL, short for Less Commonly Taught Languages. Actually, Telugu should be labeled ECLTL, *Even Less Commonly Taught Language*. It did not make it to the top twenty among the Less Commonly Taught Languages.

Anyway, the American government offered funding for the foreign language education. Numerous colleges and universities jumped on the bandwagon, scrambling for a native speaker who would be willing to put in his/her two cents worth to promote an LCTL. In that period, Dr. John Hastings, Associate Professor of Religious studies in a midwestern university was asked to teach Telugu. John had spent some time in Andhra Pradesh during his childhood days and had learned the script. His resume said so. The Chair suggested John teach elementary Telugu and John agreed.

That was twenty years ago. Now Dr. John Hastings was up for tenure. He told the Chair that he was hard-pressed for time since he was busy writing a book, and so, would prefer a teaching assistant share his responsibility of teaching Telugu.

"Well, we don't have funds for a T.A. position. Find somebody who can help you. Do you know any native speaker?" the Chair asked him.

Thus, it turned out to be John's job to find an assistant. The geography lecturer Dr. Murthy came to his mind. That afternoon he found Murthy sitting in the faculty lounge and sipping coffee.

John said hi to Murthy, sat down next to him, waiting for the right moment to broach the subject, and the right moment came soon enough. "Didn't you say your wife has a master's degree? No job yet as I recall," he said.

Murthy was confused. He had never said anything about his wife looking for a job.

"Yes, she has a master's degree in economics, and no, she is not working," Murthy said.

"I have an idea. We are looking for an assistant to teach Telugu," John said, looking sideways.

"My wife never taught Telugu. She used to work in the customer service department in a bank in my hometown."

"Well, she is a native speaker. I'm sure she knows the alphabet, doesn't she? Knows how to read and write, I assume," John said.

"Let me talk to her," Murthy said, still unclear where this was going.

"Think about it, don't take too long though. The Chair told me not to wait too long," he added with a smile, "The pay is not much, but more than what she was making as a bank rep, I suppose."

Murthy was hurt by the last remark but kept quiet. John reminded him one more time to get back to him soon and left.

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Kantha threw in dirty clothes in the washer, turned it on, and returned to the family room. She was reading a Telugu novel when Murthy walked in. She folded the corner of the page she had just finished and got up to bring coffee for her husband.

"Where's Kittu?" Murthy asked, looking around.

"Janet was going to the park with her kid. She took Kittu also with her."

Murthy looked at Kantha, sipping coffee. He was a bit hesitant to open the subject.

"What?" she asked. Instinctively she understood that he wanted to say something.

"Nothing," he said quickly. After a few seconds, he added slowly, "You remember John? We met him and his wife at the Christmas party last year."

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, he says they are looking for an assistant to teach Telugu."

"So?"

"He says you can have the job if you want." He stressed the last part.

Kantha was surprised. "You know I am not looking for a job. Besides, I don't have a degree in Telugu literature. You know that too," she said, staring at her husband.

"I'm not saying you've to take it. He suggested it, I did not tell him you are looking for a job. I am simply conveying the message. Don't shoot the messenger."

He smiled. Kantha laughed.

"Think about it. It's not like you've to be there 8 to 5 pouring over a pile of files. You go to the class, teach and come home. You may have to have some office hours but you don't have to be there for preparation. You can prepare at home and the preparation time counts too. Plus, that may serve as a break from your housework."

Kantha wondered, *he wants me to take this job?* She did not say it aloud though.

Murthy added almost like an afterthought, "It may not be much but the money is still money. It is more than what you used to make as a bank rep."

That was a slap in the face. She rejoined quickly, "How could you ...?"

Before she finished the sentence, Murthy cut in. He knew he misspoke. "I didn't mean it that way. I was simply stating what John had said," he said quickly.

"Still you know, with the money I was making as a bank rep, I could afford a maid, a washerman, and save a little for the rainy days too."

The debate continued for another hour or so. In the end however Kantha agreed to give it a try. Thus, Kantha had entered the job force.

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Kantha started teaching Telugu, and found soon enough that it was anything but a breeze, it was more like a three-ring circus or a dog walking on his hind legs. The entire education set up and the attitude of the students were so different from what she had grown up with.

She received her first lesson in the first week itself.

The class consisted of three students - two of Indian origin and one American. Anita, one of the two students of Indian heritage, was born in the U.S. and picked up a few Telugu phrases from her grandma, who visited them every other year.

The second student, Phon, was originally from India. He was adopted by Mary Hawk, when he was eight years old. Mary had been vacationing in India and met Phon at the hotel where she had stayed. Back then he was known as Premkumar. He was not an employee of the hotel but hung around, offering help to the hotel customers. One day he offered Mary to show her the temple. Something struck a chord in her, and a year and half later, and after overcoming several bureaucratic hurdles, Mary succeeded in bringing him to the States. Phon had a hard time adjusting to the new culture and the new environment.

The third student, a nonheritage student, Julie came from Chicago. She said she had several Telugu friends.

"Does that mean you know some Telugu?" Kantha asked.

"Oh, no. I never heard them speak Telugu. In fact, they all speak very good English," Julie replied with a wry smile. Nevertheless, she seemed to be the only student who was aware of the process of learning a foreign language. She stayed on course dutifully.

In all, all the three needed to learn the structure of the language. But the heritage speakers could pick up the skills faster, understandably.

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Kantha started with the alphabet and pronunciation. She gave them a few words and told them to copy down until they got them on their fingertips, literally; that was their homework. She insisted on the importance of memorization in learning the language.

"It is like swimming. When you are thrown into a lake, you don't have the time to check the handbook. You will just flap your arms and legs and get to the shore anyway you can. If you want to have a good conversation with a native speaker, you don't walk around with a couple of dictionaries and keep checking each time you need to say a word. The words must be on the tip of your tongue, I mean literally."

Anita disagreed. "No, Kantha, memorization is dated. In fact, that is the reason all these Asian countries are lagging behind. They still believe in the dated tradition of learning by rote; they hang on to a handful of tumbledown textbooks they've had for centuries. You know what is our strength here in America? *Our* strength lies in identifying the sources and putting them to work. That is what managing intelligence is about; using the brains," she said, tapping on her temples with her index finger.

Kantha was stunned by the way Anita uttered *our*. Kantha grew up with a different set of values and traditions. In her country, they never called the teacher by name, nor told the teacher what should be taught, much less how it should be taught. In her tradition, the teachers possessed the knowledge; the rule in the class was to listen, do the assigned work and ask the questions later, much much later.

Kantha took a few seconds to respond. She said, "You're right about learning in general. But then, there are also skills which require mastering them to use effectively. And language learning is one of them."

Anita was not convinced. "I don't care. I'll make enough money to have a resident translator wait on me hand and foot, if need be. All I need is a C in this course and I am done with this second language requirement."

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It became a tug of war ever since Anita told Kantha that a C was enough for her.

"Did you do the homework?"

"Yeah!" she would hand in the paper.

"I said ten sentences. You wrote only two."

"No time. I have social life, you know."

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"Where is your homework?"

"Sorry, I had to take care of my friend's dog."

"What happened?"

"She was sick. I took her to the vet."

"Why didn't your friend take her to the vet himself?"

"He had Chemistry class."

Kantha wondered if her next line would be the *dog ate my homework*.

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"Did you write the past tense forms?"

"I will, tomorrow."

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"This is not what I asked. I asked you to write a few sentences using the vocabulary given in the class yesterday."

"I couldn't think of any. So, I thought if I threw a curve ..."

And then, came another twist. "I will be the only student next semester. There is plenty of time to get this stuff," she said, watching Phon through the corner of her eye. Phon snickered.

It was beginning to look like those two were having a private session of their own in the classroom.



"I am paying," Anita said on another occasion. She was hell-bent on out-Americaning Americans!

The three words Anita had said annoyed Kantha as she understood what she meant by that. Anita could choose not to register, and then there would be no class, meaning no job for Kantha. She collected herself and remained calm for the moment but her patience started wearing off. She tried to explain that Anita must learn the basics; understanding the structure is the first step in language learning. On another occasion, she had one of her Indian friends write the story for her and showed it to Kantha as her own. Once again Kantha explained to her that it was plagiarism and unacceptable. Anita could get an F, it was reported.

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Kantha told Murthy about Anita's attitude in class. Murthy dismissed it lightly at first. Kantha was persistent, she was committed to getting results. And results was not the thing Anita had in mind. Well, maybe she did but not on the same lines as Kantha. Finally, Murthy said, "You are the teacher. Tell her she must stick to the course content."

Kantha struggled to explain to him that she had been trying the hardest and it had been not working, and that Anita's attitude had been getting out of hand.

"Look, Kantha, you must understand that you are in America. Things are different here, the system is different. You can't act like you were teaching a class back home in our village. The reality is Anita just needs to get through the second language requirement. I know she will not behave same way in her biology class or math class. The students set their priorities. Don't take it personally."

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It was time for the mid-term exam. Kantha told the class that the test would be on the two lessons covered during that week. The quiz included ten questions. As always, Anita had to say something. She wanted to make it open book.

"All right," Kantha consented.

All the three students opened their books. Anita opened the wrong lesson, apparently she was not listening when Kantha made the announcement. Kantha walked up to her and pointed to the correct lessons.

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At night, after dinner, Kantha sat down with the tests. Clearly Anita made up her mind that a C was enough for her. She was so careless in her performance. She wrote the English equivalents even for the Telugu words, which she could have easily copied from the question. Probably, she was making a point, or, may be, copying was not her strong suit. Either way Kantha was not pleased.

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For Phon, it had been always a struggle ever since he had arrived in this country. He had no friends in school to talk to; nobody spoke the only language he had known all this life. The other children were teasing him for his accent, for the way he ate and the clothes he wore, which were made in Taiwan and bought from a local Wal-Mart store.

"Did your dad make them?" children would tease him.

"I am not from Taiwan," he would say, steaming inside.

He could not take it anymore, and ran away from home. Luckily, Mary found him sleeping on a park bench, a few miles away and brought him back. Thenceforth, she worked harder to make him feel at home. Taught him a few things about survival in this country - he must stand up for himself, must not let others step on his toes, he was just as smart as the next, must never think less of himself, never let others think less of him, success meant beating others at their own game and getting ahead.

His little brain processed the advice in his own uncouth way and he formed his own attitude. Eventually, he grew into a sneaky little brat without ever being caught in the act. His slight build, baby face and his mischief-mongering eyes helped him to wiggle out of any sticky situation, he might get into.

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Kantha noticed that Phon possessed average vocabulary, his oral skills were above average but his writing and reading skills needed lot of work, and he was not inclined to put in that effort. On the other hand, he resorted to other sneaky means.

"You are beautiful," he said one day.

The next day he brought cookies, and flowers on the following day. Yet another day, he asked her, "Will you go to the movies with me?" Then he said he wished that she taught all other classes. It was awkward for Kantha, and becoming increasingly so as the days passed by.

And then came another surprise.

That night, Murthy came home late. Kantha was done cooking and waiting for him. He looked slightly distraught.

"Something wrong?" she asked him casually.

"No, nothing wrong," he said, but his tone said otherwise.

"What's wrong?" she asked him again.

"Nothing. Don't worry," he said, and after a few seconds, added, "Students say things sometimes out of frustration."

"What students? What are you talking about?"

"I'm telling you, nothing wrong. Sometimes students take out their frustration on teachers. I see it all the time."

"Will you stop tap-dancing and tell me who said what?"

"Did you make any denigrating comments about John's teaching in class?" Murthy asked her straight.

"What?" Kantha was shocked, "Who said that? Of course not, I did no such thing. Why would I say anything about any teacher for that matter? Who said that, anyway?"

"Apparently, somebody told him that you have said something belittling about his teaching."

"Like what?"

"Like who taught you this gibberish or something like that ... I don't know. John did not give me any details, just said it is inappropriate to comment on other teachers in front of students."

"That is a big lie."

"That's okay. Just don't refer to other teachers in class."

"I am telling you I did no such thing," Kantha said, stressing each word clearly. She was perplexed. Whoever could have spread such lies and why?

Kantha wondered if it was Anita but there was nothing she could do about it.

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From Phon's perspective, learning Telugu was a totally different story. With this Telugu class, he was reminded of his childhood days. Phon never spoke two sentences without referring to mothers and sisters. That was what he had picked up on Vijayawada streets. Now this lady was teaching him the language of the polite society, which was very frustrating to him. So called standard Telugu or colloquial Telugu Kantha was pushing down his throat was just trash for all he cared. In his mind, he had already learned how to speak the language. "That's all what matters," he said to Kantha.

"So, why are you taking this class?" Kantha asked patiently.

Phon shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know. Thought it would be fun, maybe." The truth was it was not his idea in the first place. Mary wanted him to study Telugu; she wanted him to keep in touch with his roots.

Kantha did not venture the next question.

As for the homework, the two phrases - *teleedu* (I don't know) or *raayaledu* (I didn't write) became his favorite responses. Kantha found another way to make them do their homework. Make them work right there in the classroom.

Phon sat in his chair laid back, chewing gum and with his legs stretched out. After a few minutes, she asked him if he had finished the exercise.

"*raayaledu*," he replied in Telugu.

"Why?"

"*teleedu*"

"What is it you did not know?"

"Meanings for these words here," he pointed out.

Kantha walked up to him, and put her index finger on the list of the new words noted at the end of the exercise.

"Oh," Phon stared at the page for a few seconds and said, "What about this?" pointing to a word that was not on the list.

Kantha said that it was given the previous week. "You could have looked it up in the dictionary," she added.

Recently, Phon was spending his time in the class either jotting down notes or referring to the dictionary he had borrowed from the library. Kantha was not sure if he was taking notes. One

day she asked him a question and found out that he could not explain his own notes. Kantha tried to tell him that he was missing what was being taught in the class while he was busy with his own private session as it were.

"John told us to refer to the dictionary," Phon said.

Kantha took a few seconds and said, "Yes, that is true. However, the purpose of this class is to equip you with the tools necessary to enable you to read the texts by yourself. You do need to understand the structure - separating a word and identifying the root form of a verb - to be able to refer to the dictionary. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the explanations in class. That helps you to be able to use the dictionary at home."

"Whatever," Phon mumbled.

Kantha clinched her teeth without showing it.

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Kantha sat down to grade the final exam papers. There was one paper jumping at her - it was Phon's. First she put a check next to each mistake, and then, went back, and started writing down the correct answer - two to three mistakes per line! Unbelievable. Was Phon being idiotic on purpose? Wanted to show that he was in charge?

She knew he could do better than that, a lot better. If an outside examiner were to evaluate that paper, Phon would get a C for that performance. Kantha kept thinking: If I take his homework into consideration, he will get a BC; if I take his grammar and attitude into consideration, he gets a BC, but with his vocabulary and performance on a few occasions in class, he deserved a B or even an AB ...

Kantha closed her eyes and started weighing in all the factors up for consideration - the student's attitude factor, his needs factor, her job factor, her husband's position factor, the professor's goodwill factor, the department's prestige factor, the bell curve factor, her income factor, and the last but not the least, the enrollment factor, ... ..

Suddenly she was jolted into the present by her son's bubbly voice. "Mommy, see, A, B, ..." He was babbling gleefully for all the show of his expertise in scribbling the alphabet.

Kantha jumped to her feet, screaming, "Oh, no, no," and snatched away the pencil from his tiny grip before he could scribble a C as well.

She stared at his scribbling, A and B, for a second. An impish smile spread on her lips. "Good job, my boy, you have resolved it for me."

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## 18. TOO SMALL FOR THE BIG PICTURE

My name is Malathi, nicknamed Smallathi, always in the front row in group pictures. Back home I was considered average height. Here in the States, just cute.

I sit in my livingroom watching the snowflakes as they whirl and descend on the branches; hear the nerve wracking noises of the snow plow from below my unit. They seem to highlight the anomaly in my little world. Up until now the jarring noise from the snow plow has been music to my ears.

It's ten years today since I moved in. I've been watching the snowflakes gracing the window panes, some balancing on the bare branches of the trees on the lot line, and flocks of birds forming a sharp cone and heading south. A strong urge for hot tea springs my head. I go to the kitchen, fill a cup with water from the faucet, and put it in the microwave.

Flop, flop ... drops of water trickle from the faucet to a beat. Probably it's not shut it fully. I push the handle down, swing it left and right. The trickle stops. Ha, my mistake. I drop a teabag in the cup, and return to the dazzling sight of the rising sun. The whiteout cloaks the branches.

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I recall my realtor's words when I started looking for a house. "For you, condo is the way to go," she, Jenny, said. "You can own a home without worrying about shoveling snow or mowing lawn. Trust me, that rattling of those machines will be music to your ears. You may even enjoy watching 'em with a book in your lap. ... It's a small complex you see, just four buildings, thirty-two units, just like your home in India, the extended family and all ..."

I could see that she was trying to impress me with her knowledge of my culture. I turned away. "Beautiful view of the trees and the lake farther up there," she said.

I strained my eyes to see the water glistening through the branches.

I had nothing to say. Sold! I moved to my own place the following month.

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A car pulls out from the garage across from my unit and stops. A lady gets out of the car, goes into the garage, returns with a shovel, and starts clearing the snow that piled up in front of her garage entry. That means I have to do the same. I go out and shovel the snow in front of my garage. She sees me and smiles, I smile back. No big deal, shoveling a little snow is not all that bad.

But the faucet is another story, it is erratic, sometimes drips and other times doesn't. I can't decide whether I should call a plumber or not. Maybe the manager can help me. It seems such a small problem.

I call the manager.

"Hello."

"Hello, this is Malathi."

"Who? Monica?"

"No, not Monica, Malathi. I am in South Oaks complex."

He doesn't remember, which is understandable. He manages three complexes.

"Sorry, what's your name again, Molina?"

I waddle through the spelling. "No, not Malina. Malathi. Em as in mother, A as in ..." I go blank.. I can't think of a word that starts with A.

"M as in Mary, A as in Adam?"

"Yesyesyes, sir. Adam. And then L as in lost."

"N as in Nancy?"

"No, L," I yell, almost. Better be careful lest I should offend him.

I get through my name. Now, to the real problem.

"My kitchen faucet is leaking?"

"What?"

"Leak ... uh ...Faucet. The faucet leaking."

"Ma'am, you've to speak slowly. Tell me again. Start with your unit number."

I start all over again. Like English composition class. Spellings, similes, metaphors, ...

"The problem inside your unit is your responsibility. You need to call a plumber."

"Okay," I hang up. I don't know any plumber. I was hoping the manager could find a plumber for me. I'm wrong, hum. What the heck, maybe easier to live with an occasionally leaking faucet than finding a plumber. I decide to postpone the call until the faucet gets real bad.

It has not always been like this. At the beginning there was no professional manager. The unit owners formed into an association in my third year. Everybody pitched in, yard work, gardening, little repairs, suggestions for improvements ... we worked together. We hired professionals for snow removal, mowing the lawn, and trimming the trees, etc. We all felt the pleasure of living in a condo, pride of homeownership. For over four years now, we have a board of directors, a manager; and things are changing fast.

The board calls for a meeting. The president looks around, counts the heads, twenty-three, "We've quorum."

President's report, Secretary's report, Treasurer's report. President speaks of a brilliant idea suggested by the manager; he says his plan helps our units to appreciate in value. He suggests to buy the piece of land between our complex and the lake and build more units. A great investment opportunity, he says. The board of directors agrees. A couple of unit owners disagree. Who owns the building? We all own, we'll be shareholders Who's got the money for such a big project?

"I can advance the money," the manager says.

Somebody from the back row says, "We thought all units are owner-occupied."

"We'll offer the units with a rent-to-own option. In a few years, we can convert them to owner-occupied. Since there is a lake, the units will be sold as lakefront properties. The entire complex appreciates in value."

There is one more glitch. Before we embark on that project, we need to make improvements on our lot. Chop the trees and put something contemporary like a rock park.

"No, we like the trees. They serve as a barricade shielding our buildings from the street."

"The trees are old and rotting. They're going to come down soon enough. You don't want that kind of problems."

He has readymade answers for every question raised. Every rule has loopholes, only you have to find them ...

The discussion is over. A unit owner in the front row makes a motion and another seconds it. The secretary counts the votes - eleven 'yeah's, eight 'nay's and four abstain. The motion carried.

What a crock, my heart moans. Look at the numbers. In a complex of thirty-two owners, a board of five draft a proposal and six more approve it. Just eleven, that is 33%, and they succeed in getting a proposal put in place. Put it another way, twentyone unit owners - nine unit owners who did not care to show up, eight nays, and four absentions - donot support this proposal. Still the motion carried.

My pleasure of homeownership starts to fizzle. A white hair gleams on my dark sleeve. Am I losing my hair? Am I going to lose an arm and a leg, and a piece of my mind too with all the new things that are being proposed to help the complex appreciate in value?

Then comes my heating bill. A whopping one hundred and fifty percent higher than the preceding season, a shocker. I always kept the thermostat setting at the same level. I get online and check the degree days in Wisconsin which gives me a comparison of heat for the past three years. There numbers seem to be fairly the same, there is nothing to show that this year temperatures are much higher than in the previous years. And I certainly did not leave the doors and windows wide open. How is this possible? I don't remember ever seeing heating bills like these - for five months in a row the amounts are \$72, 53, 75, 53, and 75. Strange sequence, unbelievable. Somebody should rewrite the old adage that women and weather are unpredictable, I guess. I return the bill to the manager asking him to see if he made a mistake.

Six months go by, no word from the manager. Maybe too busy for small things like my heating bill. For someone who could advance money for an eight-unit building, \$200.00 is probably lunch money. Or, is it just me?

Finally, I receive a letter from the manager. There is no explanation for the ridiculous hike in my bills; just a reminder, a "past overdue" notice. It ticks me off. What happened to my request to check the bill for accuracy?

I sit down to write another letter reminding him politely of the contents in my previous letter. I know they, the board and the manager, prefer a phonecall but I am not a phone person. We in India are used to be around each other, sitting in the same room, eating in the same kitchen, and sleeping in the same room most of the time. Even after thirty years in the States, I haven't gotten used to the phone. It feels like talking to a wall (come to think of it, I do stare at the wall while on the phone). Besides, in a case like this it is hard to explain a lot of things on the phone. I can't. When I write, I can think, edit, rearrange my thoughts and present them clearly.

Anyway, I start writing again, giving all the details why I thought the bill was a mistake. Once again, no response.

A few weeks go by, and a third bill arrives with the amounts showing past overdue. What is he doing with my letters? Is this his way of telling me that I must call if I want his attention?

Frustrated, I write to the board. I don't hear from them, but the manager shows up.

"Let me check your thermostat," he says.

"It's working fine. It's new. I installed last year."

"Let's see. That's a start."

I say okay. After a few minutes he tells me the thermostat is working fine.

"What next?"

He says he'll be back next week and leaves.

A month goes by. No sign of the manager. Time for the next billing cycle. I get the bill for October. I did not notice that the heat was on in October. Nevertheless I got the bill showing my usage and the amount due. My anger reaches a new level.

I ask my neighbor about their heating bills. Nothing unusual in his bill. I tell him my sad story.

"Well, the manager has no time to look into all the details," he says.

Details? I don't understand. I am not talking about a twenty or thirty dollar hike; two hundred dollars is big enough amount, a cause for concern for me at least. If I let it continue, this year my heating bill will exceed my mortgage. My blood boils. Somebody has to account for this atrocity. Manager is not giving me answers, nor the board president or the secretary. And I can't expect answers from the other unit owners.

I find an attorney and try to explain the problem. He shakes his head, "No, you don't want to involve me in this. Try to work it out with the management."

"Can you send the manager or the board a letter at least?"

"No, I don't think that's a good idea. Let's see what the manager says."

I am losing it on the double. I turn on the TV. Peoples court is on. A tenant suing the manager and the manager countersuing the tenant. The case is about the plaintiff blaming the manager for not taking care of repairs and the manager, claiming he never got a phonecall from the tenant. Amusing, almost similar to my situation. I pull up my chair and turn up the volume.

I go over various scenarios in my mind, what if I drag my manager and the board of directors to the court.

The judge on the 24" screen delivers the verdict, "It is your word against his. You say you'd written to him and he says he never received your letters. You don't have his replies to show that he had received them. I feel sorry for you but I need evidence. Without evidence you have no case."

I slouch in my couch and let the steam out. I hate the judges who say "You have a case but you did not prove it." In disgust, I flip the channel.

The president is delivering his weekly speech, clutching the dais tight.

"We are winning." Really? Why don't you talk about the soldiers who are being killed every day and the families that depended on them?

"We are making progress." What progress? Where're we heading?

"The economy is booming. We have created 150,000 new jobs." People are taking low-paid jobs with no benefits. Does that count? You call that economic boom?

The president throws his arms into the air and says with a plastic smile, "You should look at the big picture."

The big picture - that throws me off. Next president, next war, next disaster - the same argument, the big picture ... the greater good. There lies the crux of the problem. You look up, look at the big picture, and you lose sight of the little people at the ground zero level. They don't mean a thing for those who are looking up and looking at the big picture.

I get the message. This complex is growing big and I am too small for the big picture. Something inside my head snaps. I am not going to go away without letting the big picture folks feel my existence.

I sit down to write my last letter to the manager.

"I haven't heard from you in a month. I'm not going to wait for one more season, go through the same rigmorale one more time, and let you blame it on the power company and the hurricane Katrina for the big hike in my next heating bill. If you don't or can't do it, I'll arrange for an inspection by a professional heating system inspector myself and deduct the cost from the condo fee."

This time the letter goes by registered post, requesting for acknowledgement.

"Don't hold your breath. You know you can't squeeze blood from a turnip," my neighbor says.

I see her point. I pick up the phone to call Jenny, my realtor. "Let's meet. I want to move out."

She comes in that evening. "Where do you want to move?", she asks, with her eyes gawking the lot across from the street.

I see the big picture again, writ large on her face.

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## 19. ALL THIS, JUST FOR YOU!

Snowstorm has been blasting away for a while now! Trees and cars on the street are barely visible.

Dharani is sitting by the window and watching the blast. “Thank goodness it is Sunday,” she tells herself for the fourth time. Or else, it would have been a hell of a ride to work. She is brooding over the argument she has had with her husband Dinakar last night. It is still raw in her mind. Her eyes turn towards the bedroom. There, he is sleeping like a baby; not a care in the world as far as he is concerned. It is getting close to nine. There is no sign of waking up anytime soon. The snowbirds are heading south announcing the arrival of winter in their own language. They form a sharp cone, like soldiers in a drill session. For Dharani, it is a sight to watch. She watches them every year; the fascination never ends. She turns her eyes to the squirrels on the yard. They are busy collecting nuts and transporting them to their abodes at the base of trees. Somewhere she has read that they would collect them just enough for one winter. Wonder why humans do not have the same kind of sense. Man is called rational animal. But then, who said that? Man, of course! Only *we* have to certify ourselves! Maybe the birds and animals are laughing at us for being so full of ourselves!

The day Dharani set foot in America is a fond memory. Her husband doted on her and she was elated. He kept asking, “What do you want?” “What would you like to have?” “What is your wish?” and provided it on the double. He bought new furniture and new window curtains. He was proud to show off his new wife, introducing her as “my missus.” She could not help thinking, “Wow, what a great man; the love he has for me!” He tells her ten times a day that she is gorgeous and that she, in her new sari, is blinding him. He repeats, “I love you” as if it is a *tirumantira*. One day he even asked her why she would not say she loves him. “Do you not love me?” he asked.

Dharani laughed casually, “I don’t know. Maybe because we don’t use that kind of language back home.”

Lady luck smiled on him at the same time as his better half joined him in America. A huge project fell into his lap. He flipped over. “All this, because of your luck. You must have worshipped the gods with gold blossoms in your previous life. That is why you have been blessed with a genius like me,” he said, inhaling air into his lungs and expanding his chest.

Dharani laughed happily.

All good things do come to an end. Dinu’s project ended. After that, he had a couple of other projects. Two years went by in a jiff. Currently, he is waiting for another good project. The word “good” is notable. After two big projects, he is in no mood to accept small projects. He is determined to accept only the projects that could put his abilities to the best use. He is waiting for that colossal project.

Dharani’s thoughts are traveling in a different direction. At first, she did not mind. As the time went by, a tiny fear has started sprouting, grown into branches, and now stood as a huge tree in front of her eyes. It is frightening. When Dinu passed two or three projects, it did not bother her.

She even seemed to have understood his logic. “Of course, who would not want a job that is challenging to his abilities?” She told herself. Days, weeks, and months went by. Now it is getting scary as the time “he is unemployed” is stretching to new length each day. The thought that it

actually decreases his prospects for big projects is chewing her up. Her heart is writhing inside with the question, “Why Dinu, who claims to be a man of unusual talent, cannot see that?”

One of those days, Dinu received a call from a Microsoft subsidiary for an interview. Dinu did not go.

“Why?” Dharani asked, narrowing her eyes. Anybody else would have jumped at the prospect.

“That manager and I attended the same school. He does not have even one half of my IQ. Why would I want to work under his supervision? Absurd,” he said.

Dharani was surprised. He did not even go for the interview; he was already speaking as if he had gotten the job! She did not say it aloud though. After four weeks or so, he received another call from another company and again he disregarded it. Why? Because the CEO in the company was his friend’s brother. He went to Colorado for an interview but dismissed it as stupid job. His reason: he did not like the neighborhood where the office was located.

Dharani is getting more and more worried by the minute. She wonders whether he has any interest in work at all. As the saying goes *udyogam purushalakshanam* [Work is man's unique characteristic]. Nowadays, not only men but even women also are not whiling away their time sitting at home and clipping nails. How could anybody sit around doing nothing? Has he hung his brains on the hook like a shirt?

Dharani could not do so. She joined the workforce within a year after she had landed in America. Since she had a master’s degree in biology, she tried to get into Ph.D. program in an American university. She was told that she needed to take a few courses first. Unwilling to repeat the courses she had already studied in India, she started looking for jobs. Her prospects were quite good in Minneapolis and Chicago but she did not want to move because it would hurt her husband’s work. Of course, she had seen couples living in different cities and commuting for weekend get-together but she was not interested in that lifestyle. Therefore, she took a part-time position as a customer rep in a local bank. No, it was not a dream job; not something she would kill for. She took it only to escape from the house-arrest condition within the four walls. The Bank manager recognized her talent soon enough and made her full-time supervisor within six months. The income was good. Dinu was not like that. It was not in his nature to settle for anything but the top position. The day Dharani told him that she was taking a position at the bank he was displeased. He said, “I would never settle for such a crummy job.” In his mind, that was the worst of the worst lot.

Dharani is upset. The entire situation is annoying. This man recites I love you mantra endlessly yet does not care how I feel in reality. He is not even looking for a job. What am I supposed to think of him? Given the current economy, even those who have jobs are worried sick about keeping them, and here this man is hoping that somebody comes looking for him and hand him a high rank position on a silver platter.

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Dharani is reading today’s newspaper. She sees a job in the classified column and says to her husband, “Did you see this?” pushing the paper towards him.

It ticks him off. He flips. "What's the matter? When did it come to this? You are looking for jobs for me? Are you saying I am incapable of finding a job for myself?" he shouts.

Dharani is taken aback. "Did I say you cannot look for it by yourself? I happen to see it and so asked you if you saw it," she says coyly.

"What made you think that I did not see it?"

"Cause the paper has arrived just now and I picked it up first."

"Why don't you say what is on your mind? You think this is fun for me, that I enjoy goofing around like this, right?"

"Why do you put words in my mouth? Did I say that?"

"Well, then give it to me straight. Come on. Does it bother you that I am in your face all day? You may think so now. Just wait and see. After I land a dazzling position, and get too busy to be home, you yourself will complain that you hardly see me, if at all. To speak the truth, do you know how many women are wailing that their husbands are hardly ever home?"

"Alright. It's my fault. I will never say another word again."

Dharani goes into the next room. As they say, one word begets another—that is the way with words. She is trying the best she could to be patient yet the issue is piercing through her heart. Yes, family life meant to be "for worse and for better". It also means talking openly and freely. How can she put up with him when he is distorting every word she speaks? He keeps asking her what she wants. Does she not also want to know what he wants and help him to achieve that goal? What is wrong with her wanting to help him?

Her mode of thinking is plausible all right but she is lost as to how to convey it to him. Here in America everybody says, "Talk, talk." How can she talk when he is in no mood to listen? Does it not take two to "talk"? If one person is willing to talk the other must be willing to listen as well. And that is the problem. It is not in his character. It just is not in him to listen.

Dinu calms down after an hour or so. "Poor thing. She is a simpleton, no street smart," he tells himself and comes back to her. He says coaxingly, "Look, how can I bear the thought that you don't believe in me?"

"Did I say I don't believe in you?" Dharani says softly.

"Think about it. You know what Dinakar means. The Sun, who submerges the world with his brilliant rays and awakens, right? That is who I am. A day comes when a big company realizes my brilliance and invites me to help them. Then you will tell yourself, 'I gave him hard time only because of my stupidity,'" he says laughing loudly.

Dharani does not find it amusing. He seems to believe it with all his heart, for all she could see. "Okay, I agree you meant well. I am sorry I raised my voice. It will never happen again," he apologizes and reassures her. He also suggests that she should go in and change. He wants to treat her to a fancy dinner at a high-class restaurant.

She goes in and puts on her favorite dress—milky white blouse with light blue flowers and matching pants. She returns to the living room.

He looks and says, "Nice," but the tone says, uh!

"What? You don't like it?"

“You look awesome in the maroon dress,” he says. He bought it on one of those occasions—when a man feels obliged to bring a present to appease his wife.

Maroon is not her favorite color. “I wore it last week when we went to visit Prakash. I’ve worn it so many times. So, I thought I would wear this for a change. Okay, I will change. No big deal,” she goes in.

Deep down in her heart, she wishes, “Why can’t he say, ‘No big deal, you don’t have to change.’ If he is so particular, why not buy another dress in the colors I like?” She even mentioned it once.

“What do you mean? You don’t think my selection is super?” he asked.

Dharani changes into maroon color dress and returns. “See how stunningly beautiful you are! The people at the restaurant will forget to eat, watching you,” he says exuberantly.

“You and your silly talk,” she shakes her head.

The next day also Dinu continues to apologize. That evening he says, “I will cook the dinner this evening. I will make eggplant fry, your favorite.”

“Never mind. I will make stuffed eggplant your way,” Dharani says.

“Let’s make both varieties,” he says jubilantly.

Dharani’s heart aches. No doubt, it is easy to make two dishes with the same vegetable. Would it not be nice if it is possible to wear two dresses at the same time?

She finishes cooking and sets the table. Dinu comes to the table. “The eggplant tastes soooo good. When you are angry, the dishes turn out tastier,” he says flippantly.

His words are exhilarating to her ears. Her food pleases his taste buds. The air clears for the moment.

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Then a day comes when Dharani musters the courage to say to him, “You obviously are not interested in working under anybody. There are no companies that can offer you a position commensurate with your qualifications. Why worry that nobody recognizes your talent. Start your business and prove your brains. Then you are your own boss plus you will be the man that can provide jobs for a couple of others to boot.”

The words shock Dinu. He jerks his head like a goaded cobra and gapes at her, narrowing his eyes. He wonders, “Is she saying that I am good-for-nothing bum? Is she making fun of me?” He is furious.

“Shut up,” he shouts at the top of his voice.

Dharani shakes like a tender mango sprout. Her heart races. She has never seen him so irate. She has never thought of him even capable of that level rage. Frankly, she has never seen in all her life anybody blasting off like that. Her parents had always been very gentle with her. During her childhood, when her father had been exasperated, all he would say, “You are so stubborn. What am I supposed to do with you?” and nothing more. When her classmates at school said something like “My father would flank me alive” or “My mother would beat me up”, Dharani could not believe that such things could occur in real life. At school, her teachers had just loved her. She had been a model student.

Dharani stares back. Blood rushes from the bottom of her feet to the top of her head. He thrusts his face into hers and says, “I don’t need your advice. Get it? Never talk to me like that again.”

She pulls away from him and shudders. The globe whirls around in front of her eyes. She hurries out of the room.

Dinu drops the coffee cup on the table and whizzes out. Coffee spills over, stains the papers on the table and the carpet underneath.

He returns at midnight, after wandering around aimlessly for several hours. He has cooled down by now. He apologizes to his wife again and again, “Sorry, terribly sorry. I am *soooo* sorry. Even I didn’t know that I possess anger that intense, not until now.” He also promises her that he would never let that happen again.

“Okay,” she says.

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At work, her colleague Stella notices that something is bothering Dharani. She seems to be miles away.

Stella is a new rep, joined just a few days back. She likes Dharani and often seeks her help in work. She has heard a lot about Indian culture and is curious about their ways.

“Are you okay?” Stella asks Dharani.

Her kind words are like a cool breeze, feeling good; it is soothing. In that moment, it feels like Stella is the only person in the world who cares about her. Not that she has nobody. Back home, there is a host of them—mother, father, sister, brothers, and childhood friends with whom she had shared food and bed. Yet, in this particular moment, there is no one but Stella who would ask her, “How are you?” Well, there is one person but he does not think about it, or so it seems.

Dharani’s heart mourns quietly. “I am okay,” she says softly, lowering her eyes.

Stella waits for a few seconds and says, “Almost lunch time. Let’s take early lunch.”

Dharani says okay, and gets up. They both sit down in a corner in the coffee room. The room is empty. Other members have not come yet. Dharani tells Stella the last night’s events briefly and says, “I don’t know what to do. He is young, at the prime of his life, very well qualified, and yet sits at home doing nothing. It is several months now. I can’t understand his attitude.”

“In your country, wouldn’t they consider it inept for a young, educated man to sit idly at home like that?”

“I am not saying that that is always the case. I think it is the same in your country too, I mean two generations back, isn’t it? Man is the breadwinner and woman the homemaker. Things are changing in India too. Probably, my grandmother would have called him a bum and told him that he should be ashamed to live off of a woman’s earnings. In my mother’s time, she started working and my father helped her, nominally though. Currently, men are participating actively in domestic chores. However, there are no separate accounts like in this country, not yet anyway.” Dharani tries to explain the situation in India in general terms. Things seem to be getting clearer even to herself as she spoke.

Stella ducks the issue of the state of affairs in America two generations back and says, “Here in our country nobody sits at home doing nothing. They find some job, one way or another. Nobody sits waiting for somebody to come and hand over a job on a silver platter. In recent times, the

stay-at-home dad trend is growing. That happens only when they have children and the wife has a better job than the husband. Even then, the husband is not really sitting at home doing nothing. He finds some kind of work he can do from home and suitable for his skills.”

Dharani is quiet for a few seconds and then says softly, “I apologized.”

“What did he say?”

Dharani shakes her head. “He keeps telling me that he loves me.”

“Well, mere words are nothing. It should show in action too. If it rains, the ground will be wet, doesn’t it?” Stella pauses and then adds, “I would suggest counseling.”

“No, that certainly is not going to work,” Dharani says quickly and then adds, “He thinks he is the greatest genius on earth. How can he agree to seek help from somebody else?”

“He will learn,” says Stella.

Dharani nods. Both return to their desks.

After she is done for the day, Dharani heads home but not in a mood to go home straight. As she drives past Lake Mendota, she pulls over, and gets out of the car. She sits close to the water, watching the sailboats on the horizon, children playing in the water while parents are standing nearby and chatting ... The entire scenery is quite comforting. Nevertheless, she is beset with distressing thoughts. Last night, as they were about to go to bed, Dinu said, “This is all only for you, only for your sake. Don’t you see, this is all for you.” She can’t help wondering. Is this all really for me? Is this what I wanted in life? What did I want in life? Really! What would have happened if I had not come to America? I would have become a Reader in some college by now. I would not have to wash dishes and clothes as I am doing now. Additionally, I would have attained a better status in society. So also, more money and the comforts money could buy. ... And then? Can’t say. Then again, what have I accomplished here? I took a job, which has nothing to do with my biology education. They offered me the position because of my master’s degree, not because of the knowledge I had acquired in a specific field. At work, in the early days, one of her coworkers asked, “What does your husband do?”

“Nothing,” she replied casually.

“Nothing?” the coworker was shocked.

Dharani looked at her face and realized that the joke was lost. She quickly corrected her statement, “I mean at present. He is an engineer. Just finished one huge project and waiting for another. I mean he is in between jobs.”

“I see,” said the coworker, “So, you’re wearing the pants at home.”

Dharani turns pallid. Later the colleague apologized for being rude. For Dharani, it was hard to ignore it all the same. In the following few weeks, she heard her colleagues make casual conversations about their husbands.

“Tom was sitting at home doing nothing, you know. I told him I can’t take it and threw him out. Who wants a man like that?”

“My husband has been a couch potato for quite sometime. I am making him do all the chores, including driving me to and from work. Let’s say I am the husband.”

“Good for you! Why marry a man who cannot take care of you? Might as well get a dog.”

“There must be some kind of problem. Or else, how can one not find a job for so long?”

“Maybe personality issue.”

“Guess so. Must be either lack of social skills, team spirit, or fear of failure.”

“Maybe, it is okay in India. Nobody here sits around waiting for somebody to offer him a job on a silver platter. One has to prove oneself first and then may be one gets better offers. Not by doing nothing, no way!”

Dharani is having hard time listening to these comments. How come her husband acts like he does not know that?

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At home, Dinu is sitting in the second bedroom, converted as office room, and pondering over. He is agitating over the fact that his wife is unable to see things his way. Don't I know that her parents are calling me “a bum,” and thinking that I am living off my wife's earnings? To speak the truth, did I say I will not work? All I am saying is I am waiting for a job commensurate with my qualifications. What is wrong with that? Let's face it. Won't she jump at the prospect when I shine in my field? If I only wait until I got a job that may utilize all my strengths and capabilities, I shall shine like a star. And who benefit from that? She and the children we will have. Is it not? If I accept a mediocre position now, what happens? How can I prove my extraordinary abilities? Will I ever be able to recover from the damage the low position causes? Why can't she understand how people interpret that kind of situation? They would say, “If you are really that smart, why did you accept it?” “Why are you working in this low rank position for so long?” “If you are really qualified, your company would have made you a director by now, wouldn't they?” Dharani does not understand all this. She does not even try to understand. Wouldn't I grab any opportunity that is commensurate with my exceptional brain? ... ..

He is convinced that his exceptional brains would be wasted, if he accepts a mediocre position. Then she will never know that her husband is amply gifted and he is the one for the next Nobel Prize award. She does not know that, unlike in India, here people do not care what I do with my life. Nobody is going to look down on me because I am not working.

Dinu is convinced that he is on the right path to glory.

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It is past 7:00 p.m. Dharani leaves the shoes at the door and asks, “Had coffee?”

Dinu is in the living room reading today's paper. “No.”

Dharani goes into the kitchen, makes coffee and returns with two cups. She hands one cup to her husband, and settles in the sofa across from him, with the second cup. “I phoned you that I would be late. You could have had your coffee,” she says.

“Thought I'd wait for you, to keep company,” he says without looking up.

Dharani looks at him. He is totally rapt in today's events in the newspaper. Stella's words are hovering in her head. The stark naked truth is taking shape and becoming clearer by the minute. She has to do something. Action is important. The intent must show in one's actions. If it rained, the ground would be wet. “This is all for you, for you only,” Dinu says. Saying is not enough. Acting is just as important, if not more.

“Find any job?” she asks.

Dinu says from behind the paper, “I’ll get it. Haven’t I told you? Just wait.”

Then follows the same old argument. He says again, as always, “For whom do you think I am waiting for a great job patiently? I want you to be proud of me, proud that you have a great husband. This is all for you.”

This time the wife does not back off as before. She is calm but forceful in her tone. She says, “No, it is not for me. It does not look like it is for me. I am not feeling that way. You are sitting around without work only to please yourself. One hundred percent for your own sake. You are doing it to satisfy your own stupid ego. Nobody in this country sits around waiting for somebody to hand over a high rank position on a silver platter. If you want to do something for me, I mean really for me, get a job. Prove that you are capable of finding a job. Show it in action.”

Dinu, stunned, drops the paper. His livid face shows.

The wife continues, “I am going on a Caribbean cruise with Stella at the end of this month. By the time I return, I hope to see you either as employed in some company or the owner of your own business.”

Dinu picks on the opportunity to change the subject. “Why Stella? Let us go together, you and me, on our second honeymoon.”

“I am going with Stella. By the time I return I want to see you either employed or as the owner of your own business,” she repeats firmly.

“Or else?”

“You will see,” Dharani gets up and walks toward the kitchen royally.

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## 20. A SHELL WITH A HOLE

Muthyam was dawdling along the beach. He was a fifteen-year old young man. Two years back, Muthyam fell ill and lost his voice

His older brother, Giri, a software engineer in a mid-size firm, offered to get him medical help. He had promised to have the surgery on his vocal chords done in the States. That was a year ago.

Muthyam was walking slowly, with his eyes down, as if he was searching for something in the sands. He stopped suddenly. There, right at his feet was a shell lying in the sands, belly up like two crescent moons holding a tiny dark marble fondly, or, rather like sunbathing or studying the skies. Muthyam stopped; his eyes squinted. The sunrays bounced back from the shell and added a new halo to it.

After a few seconds, he bent down slowly and picked it up; held it up and noticed a hole at the center; he could see the glimmering sands through the hole. The sands, the waters, the vast expanse of the open sky reminded him of his home in his village. That was the reason he would go to the beach often. Today, he was here for the same reason. But he had never found a shell this big and this beautiful and also with a blemish. He closed his fingers around the shell tight, looked up, mustered all his might and threw it into the waters. The shell fell into the water with a splash and headed to the bottom quickly. He stood there staring at the spot where the shell had fallen. In his village, he used to throw small flat stones into the water and they would hop on the ripples a couple of times and then drown. This shell did not jump; it just drowned. He returned home. His little nephew Bobby drew the chart for the ‘tiger and the goat’ game on a tarpaulin sheet and was waiting for him. Muthyam had taught him that game soon after he had arrived here. For Bobby it was fun to create the board game on a tarpaulin sheet; it was lot more fun than running to the store and buying one.

Muthyam was about to sit down.

“Muthyam, come here for a second. Get me some curry leaves,” Vanaja called from the kitchen. Muthyam turned around to go to the kitchen. Bobby clutched his hand and pulled him down. They both knew only too well that whenever his sister-in-law called out for him, it was not going to be just for a second. But there was nothing Muthyam could do about it. He gently pulled his hand out of Bobby’s clutch and went into the kitchen.

Bobby pouted, kicked away the tarpaulin sheet and went away to ride his bike.

Vanaja was busy in the kitchen, organizing the items on the counter. They were expecting guests. Two weeks back, Giri’s English teacher in college, Sekharam, had called Giri and told him that he (Sekharam) was taking his parents in his minivan and showing places. Their first stop would be Giri’s house, a four-hour drive from his town. That would be this afternoon. Vanaja got busy cooking for the guests.

Muthyam came in with curry leaves, washed them and put them on the counter. Then he started washing the dishes in the sink.

It was past noon. Giri's office was not too far from his home. Normally he would not come home for lunch but today he made an exception in honor of the expected guests. He was about to open the door; Sekharam's car pulled into the driveway.

Giri turned around and greeted them with a big smile. Sekharam got out of the driver's seat, and opened the door for his father Somayya and mother Kotamma. Vanaja was standing at the door with a smile. She had never met them but heard Giri mention something about them. After they all got out of the car and exchanged civilities, Sekharam walked back to the car and started unloading the suitcases.

"Oh, no. Don't worry about the luggage. I'll get them," Giri said, without budging from the spot. He did not mean exactly he would when he said "I will". Muthyam knew that only too well. He quickly moved forward and took the luggage from Sekharam. Sekharam felt a little uncomfortable but let go of the suitcases anyway, and followed Giri into the living room.

Muthyam carried all the six suitcases to the guestroom upstairs and went into the kitchen. He returned with coffee and served to the guests. Giri noticed that Somayya was watching the boy curiously and felt a little embarrassed. He said to Muthyam, "Come on, sit down. Where is your coffee?"

Muthyam did not sit down. He motioned toward the kitchen and went away. Kotamma followed him into the kitchen. "Can I help?" she asked Vanaja.

"There isn't much to do, nothing really," she replied, sounding casual. She gave Muthyam two eggplants and a knife to cut.

Kotamma stood there watching them; she was trying to make a conversation. She said, "It's strange, I mean, the life nowadays. Sometimes it feels like four generations have gone by just in the past one decade. In my childhood, take any household, it would be teeming with uncles, aunts and cousins, a dozen at the least, not counting the constant influx of guests, that is. A regular traveler's bungalow, if you ask me. We women were always busy with something or other; no one telling the other 'do this or do that.' My grandfather had never sat down to eat, unless there was a guest next to him, you know."

Vanaja was listening to the lady with chuckles. She was used to this kind of rambling. Almost always, the visitors from India have only two things to talk about—either the vanishing traditions in India or the astonishing happiness in America.

In the living room, Sekharam, Somayya and Giri also were also engaged in a conversation on similar lines. Muthyam had heard them all; there was no expression on his face. He gave the cut vegetables to Vanaja, and returned to the dishes in the sink.

Somayya stood up, as if he was looking for something.

"What? Want something?" Giri asked anxiously.

Somayya replied, "Just water. You stay, I will get it myself," he said.

"No, no. You stay. I will get it," he said, and called out for Muthyam.

Muthyam brought a glass of water and gave it to Somayya, and sat down next to Bobby to help him with his homework.

Kotamma could not help noticing it. She said, “You’ve found a good boy. Nowadays, we can’t find domestic help even in our villages; nobody wants to work hard anymore.”

Vanaja cringed as if a splash of water hit her face; she was fidgety. “Oh, no, madam. He is not a domestic help; that’s my brother-in-law, Giri’s little brother. He fell sick two years back and lost his voice. We brought him to have the surgery done here,” she said quickly, anxious to set the record straight.

Kotamma was even more curious now. “So, what happened? It did not work?”

Vanaja was annoyed. Why do I have to explain to this lady, a total stranger! She’s not my cousin on mom’s or dad’s side! Yet, she needs to be civil; she must explain. “We’re working on it. First, it took six months to find a good doctor; been through two rounds of tests. Before we could set a date for surgery, other things had come up—like my sister’s marriage. Father said the groom’s family did not ask for dowry—you would think that’s a blessing. But, oh no. They wanted so many other things—a very long list of items—gifts for his mother, sisters, and grandma, a scooter for himself and what not. Father suggested I should do something about it. Had I said I was in no position to offer help, I would be the bad daughter, right? By the time we were done with it, here the home repairs came up. We craved for a home on the lakefront; we grew up on the riverside, you know. Anyway, last spring, the rains nearly dredged up the foundation; four inches of rain outside, and the basement was flooded. It cost us an arm and a leg to fix it. Both Giri and I are sincerely hoping to have the surgery scheduled coming summer.”

Kotamma was confused, what’s she talking about? Just the last line would have been sufficient! In the living room, Giri was talking; he sounded more like a politician on the eve of election day, “I don’t know, Saar, I don’t understand this society at all. People here say time is money, which is really hogwash. In truth, they put value only on their own time. We can put in the sweat and toil all we can, yet we cannot please them; they want us to work twice as hard for half the pay. And then, what is worse, they still act like they’re doing us a favor.”

“Well, Giri, market value is different from the intrinsic worth,” Somayya said complacently. He understood that one simple truth, the gist of his experiences: People are not interested in one’s abilities; they are concerned only with that part of one’s capabilities they could use. Each employer puts a value only on the amount of capabilities he could use to his own benefit; he will not consider it as evaluating the other person’s total worth”.

Vanaja came in to announce that lunch was served.

Muthyam set the plates and glasses of water. Giri sat at the head of the table and Vanaja across from him. Kotamma and Bobby sat on either side of her. Muthyam sat next to Bobby. Sekharam and Somayya sat on either side of Giri.

Giri resumed his speech on the principles of economics in the world’s richest country. “Our folks in India think here we are making lots of money, hefty dollars,—fifty rupees per dollar, you know. But, as the saying goes, dollars don’t grow on trees. They have no idea how hard we sweat to make those dollars.

Come to think of it, my entire property, land and all, was washed up clean, by the time I was done with my education. Mother got by barely. I’ve got to understand the value of labor only after I had started out on the job here, to be frank. I put my heart and soul into this, a job in the number one country in the world. Now I know. I am working thirty hours a day, holding my heart in my fist, constantly worried who might complain about what? Scared about the company

shutting down, I getting the pink slip, the worries are endless. The fear is always hanging over my head eternally.”

Somayya nodded sympathetically.

“You can’t live in fear forever. Pull yourself together,” Sekharam said as if he was obliged to say something.

Giri was still stuck on his own line of thinking, “A friend of mine in my office was saying the same thing. He nearly broke into tears as he talked about his predicament. He said his uncle had given some ten thousand rupees to his mother, probably long before he was born; he had sent the money back to his uncle god knows how many times. But the uncle obviously had been asking him for the money over and over again. He commented ruefully that that account would never get settled until one of them was dead.” Giri broke into a big laughter. Funny how the miseries of others make the best material for laughter for some people.

“Watch the time,” Vanaja alerted him.

Giri looked at his watch and jumped to his feet, “Oh no. I have to go. Please, don’t rush on my account. Eat well and rest for a while. We can go around in the evening.”

In the evening, Giri came late. Sekharam and his parents went out for a couple of hours. The long drive was tiresome for the older couple. So, Sekharam returned home early. They all gathered in the living room. Vanaja put a Telugu movie in the DVD player and turned it on.

They heard the door open and turned around. “Hi, dad,” said Bobby.

They looked at Giri and were silent; nobody knew what to say. Something was very wrong. It was writ large on his face. Giri looked as if he had not eaten for six months.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick?” Vanaja was the first to speak.

Giri shook his head flaccidly and went into the bedroom. His wife followed him. After ten minutes, they both returned to the living room. Giri got the pink slip that afternoon.

Sekharam said he was sorry. Somayya showed his sympathy in his face. Kotamma was not sure what to say.

Giri gave them the details. The company had been planning a major reorganization to improve the production quality. They had decided to bring in a young man, fresh from Yale, in his place. No, Giri was not laid off. They offered him a job in a different department, but it was not suitable for his qualifications. They even gave him a week’s time to think about it and get back to them. The management assured him that there was always room for growth.

“That’s good; isn’t it? I mean some job instead of no job,” Kotamma said.

Giri turned to Somayya and said, “Saar, we were talking about this yesterday. You tell me. How do people measure the competence of a person?” He spoke very softly; the insolence of yesterday was conspicuously absent in his tone today.

Sekharam said persuasively, “Giri, each person has a different yardstick. Possibly, you two are looking at two different things; your qualifications could be excellent, yet a mismatch for their requirements. They would put the same value on their dollar as you would on yours. I’m sure you can see the difference between the two perspectives.”

No, Giri did not see the difference; he could not. He was not to be blamed either. That was not the kind of difference that was taught at schools. No textbook discussed such things. Giri grit his teeth, without his teacher noticing it.

Sekharam and his parents decided to leave first thing in the morning.

“Why change of plans? You don’t have to leave so soon. We still can feed you,” Giri said, smiling vaguely.

“No, no; don’t get us wrong,” Sekharam protested quickly, “Mother and father are tired already. They are not used to this kind of long drives you know. So, I thought, if we start early enough, we will be in the twin cities by noon. Gives them more time to relax.”

“Have breakfast at least before you leave.”

They sat down at the dining table, and kept fumbling with their knives and forks quietly. Nobody had anything to say. Giri could not take it anymore, even if it meant showing he was desperate. He turned to the most revered man in the room and asked feebly, “Saar, what do you suggest?”

Somayya was not his ‘Saar’; he had never been his teacher, yet, he was equal to a teacher. Giri was grasping at straws. It did not occur to him that he was asking the wrong person. Somayya was just about as much befuddled by the local practices.

He spoke softly, “Look, Giri, I don’t know whether you would or should take that second job or not. Let me tell you what I’ve noticed in the past few days I’ve been here. All I see nowadays is that everybody is constantly searching for ways to grab the most for himself; it’s the same everywhere, here or back home. Yesterday I said the market value is different from the intrinsic worth of a product. Let’s say, in your resume you mentioned that you possessed remarkable knowledge of Carnatic music. You’ll try to convince your employer that you could make your presentation music to the ears of your clients. If your prospective employer is also a music buff, he could be persuaded of your argument. Otherwise, he might dismiss it as a totally useless skill for the job on hand. What I’m trying to say is the employer will put a value on only that part of your capabilities which he could utilize. You on the other hand are weighing your worth, based on your needs and capabilities as you know them. Almost all the smart folks know this simple truth but nobody acknowledges it. Why? That is what I could not figure out.”

Giri could not understand Saar’s argument. He did not get the answer he was looking for.

Muthyam went upstairs, brought all the six suitcases and loaded the minivan.

Somayya watched him and wondered if there was anything he could do for this boy. Suddenly, he walked up to Muthyam, took his hand and shoved a green bill in his palm. Muthyam tried to refuse the money; he pulled back his hand. Somayya closed the boy’s fist, patted on his shoulder gently and went to the van.

Giri and Vanaja waited until the car pulled out of their driveway and then went in.

Muthyam stood there motionless scrunching up the paper in his fist. His heart was writhing like a rattlesnake. His mother’s words came to his mind: Open the fist and the magic is gone. The magic stays only as long as the fist was closed.

Bobby tugged at his sleeve and asked again, “What is it?”

Muthyam’s eyes bounced back and forth on his fist and Bobby. What good this piece of paper would do under the circumstances he was caught up in?

“Show it. Show it to me,” Bobby was asking.

Muthyam’s five fingers opened up slowly like lotus petals at dawn. In the next moment, a breeze came blowing and swept away the currency from his palm. He thought about the shell he had tossed away yesterday. It needed a little effort on his part to toss it out; this green bill was not worth even that broken shell. It just flew away easily.

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